Witch For Hire

by Mark Slade

Close To The Bone
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Witch For Hire

For
Tracey,
the smartest person I've ever known.
Thank you for being in my life.

"You sure you're ready for this…?" – Tom Ramsey

Contents

"Burn"	**1**
"Cyril's Ashes"	**53**
"Here lies Bobby Gorman"	**131**

Part 1

"Burn"

1

Mungo didn't like Hamilton Cross very much. I don't blame him. He looked suave, arrogant and was born to succeed. That was the way life was made on the map of the stars - all of them lined up against those who would never succeed.

Mungo is my assistant. He pretty much runs the office and when I need a burglary, some muscle, or a body to hide, I lean on the six-five, two hundred pound man with the scarred face. He'd just been across the street to the Piano seller Gilley Rolf and retrieved the newspaper the old man had stolen from us. The cheap bastard couldn't even shell out twenty-five bucks for a subscription or a dollar fifty for the paper box. I get the paper to read articles written by my best friend Jeanie Stanford.

Cross waltzed into my office and promptly sat down in a ragged wooden chair that wobbled. He crossed his legs and smiled. Mungo appeared behind him, huge hands ready to snatch Cross out of that chair and throw him out like yesterday's newspaper. I shook my head to deter Mungo's actions. He growled lowly, walked away and stood at the doorway to watch over the meeting.

I sat in my swivel chair, my legs resting on my desk, crossed at the ankles, heels off my stockinged feet. I was comfortable and previously occupied with the Mansions magazine. Okay, don't judge. I have a thing for reading articles on houses I'll never be able to own. So, I love architecture. Big deal.

"You are Evelina Giles," Cross said after he breathed out of tiny, flared nostrils.

"Well," I sighed and chuckled, tossed the magazine

aside. "I'm glad we introduced me….but who the hell are you?"

"Hamilton Cross," he said, his head bobbled slightly from to side in that complacent manner that meant everyone was supposed to know who he was.

"Ah!" I clasped my hands together and rung them briskly. "That Hamilton Cross! Yes! Of course. I still don't know who the hell you are, buddy." I clucked my tongue.

"Mmm," his eyes roved around the office, trying to make sense of all things I'd managed to cram into a small room without it falling all over on us. He was judging me, and of course, the business that I was in. "You have a wonderful sense of humor for a…" He let the words trail off. I finished it for him.

"…for a witch."

"Hmm. I suppose, for a lack of vocabulary…"

"I don't need it," I said.

He chuckled. "A vocabulary?"

"Mmm," I nodded. "Not in my business." I reassured him by motioning to a fake wand I once stole from the set of a very low - budget short film. So low - budget that the local college film class had more money for a pot of coffee for its actors than those amateur yahoos. "Why are you here, Mr. Cross?"

I caught his roving eyes moving from my wiggling toes (sometimes hosiery causes them to itch.) up my ankles and calves, to my thighs, to my hips, where my skirt had been riding up from the position I sat in my chair. Well, hell, I didn't expect company that morning, since work had been scarce for a few months. I removed my legs and feet from the desk and he switched his eyes to his own shoes. He moved those sex-fueled eyes back to me.

"I want to hire you… or buy a spell of some kind… if that's what I am supposed to do." His perfect hair bounced

as if he were the star of a TV commercial. It could have been for a tooth paste ad, because Cross flashed those perfect pearly whites at me.

"I don't know what you're supposed to do," I shrugged. "Who recommended you?"

"A friend of mine," Cross quipped.

"That friend have a name?"

He thought a second. "Katie," he blurted out.

"Katie……?"

"Just a friend, okay! She had your card." He was so defensive. To be honest I didn't really care how he heard about me. If it's a spell he wants to buy, fine. Something else about him I didn't like. Mungo too - I could tell by the way he stood at the door.

"Okay," I nodded. "Mungo, would you get Mr. Cross a cup of tea?"

"Oh," Cross shook his head. "I don't want any, thank you."

"You have to have my tea, Mr. Cross. If you don't," I glared at him. "I'll think you are rude." I plant the idea in the heads of some clients to make them think I'll curse them, just to keep them in line, and to make them drink my tea.

"Shit," he resigned uncomfortably. "I don't want to be rude." He tried to smile, but it broke badly into a frown.

Mungo scuttled off, his heavy feet dragging across the creaking floorboards.

"What is your purpose for buying a spell, Mr. Cross?" I asked, fighting off a yawn. The manner in which Cross spoke was boring the hell out of me. It was some sort of fake Bostonian with a bit of rich Carolina dialect thrown in.

He cleared his throat and said: "I – uh - have to tell you that, huh?"

I nodded yes. He seemed to get agitated in short

spurts. A hardness came over his face. "I need to know where my spells are going and prepare for the consequences," I told him.

"Consequences?"

"You don't get something for nothing, Mr. Cross. Every spell cast has a cost. Whether it will be a disruption in friends and family's lives… or a small thunderstorm in the dead of winter," I said, leaning back in my swivel chair, watching the ceiling above me as I spun around and around. "Everything has a cost," I sung to him.

"Look," he stood quickly. "If you're not going to take this seriously…" I motioned for him to sit and smiled nicely at him. Cross sat back down, smiled back.

Mungo entered the office, carrying a metal tray with a faded green tea pot, the spout chipped, and a cup with a broken handle. All of it resting impatiently on the edge of the tray.

Reluctantly, Cross took his cup and sipped the tea. He brought the cup down just below his nose. We locked eyes for a second or so, and he brought the cup back to his lips and drank more than half of it. He lowered the cup, sat it on my desk, and licked his lips. He coughed, hoping the bitterness would disappear soon.

"Good," Cross stated.

An orange hue lit up his face. He glowed for the next few minutes. I looked at Mungo and smiled. He nodded to me. I shook my head. He nodded again, more forceful. I shook my head slowly. Mungo groaned.

"What kind of spell do you need, Mr. Cross?" I said.

He breathed in sharply, breathed out slowly. "I need to take something back that belongs to me. I need my boss Winston Daniels to fall asleep on the train. I might as well tell you now. I'm in love with his wife. So… I need to take something from him…"

I raised my hand and he stopped talking.
"Yeah," I said. "Mungo… get me the spell book."

2

Six years ago…

"Bobby Gorman! Where are you taking my daughter?" A silver-haired, obese woman yelled from her backdoor. Loud and boisterous; a voice tarnished by hard liquor and a million cigarettes. Her raspy voice carried across the street for every neighbor in that slummy backstreet to hear. Bobby was already revving up his Camaro as a petite blonde climbed in the open window of the passenger's side. Her legs were still dangling out the window as the car zoomed past the angry silver-haired woman. "Bring her back! You hear me, Bobby Gorman!" She shook her fist.

Her name was Della Price.

At one time, Della had been runner-up in a Miss Sunshine pageant. She was all set to appear in Playboy, until a manager of hers was taken into custody for running a child pornography ring. Her life went to shit after that. Several men, three children out of wedlock and six rehab stints, Della found herself taking care of two elderly parents on a shoe factory wage. Her only hope for survival in this world is to make sure her daughter Joanie got into a good college. But Joanie had always been love struck and fascinated with boys from the wrong side of the track. And that damned Bobby Gorman was not going to fuck things up for Della or Joanie.

A tall, pale man stood by the entrance to a Chinese restaurant, watching everything with a broad smile over his goatee. He wore a jacket from the Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album cover and top hat. His name was Simon Abaddon, and he loved being in the dirtiest, most impoverished places. Those areas always offered Simon the

best opportunities for his line of work.

"Boss, why are we here?" Sid asked. He was a small bald, tubby, crooked man with piercings in his face, and he felt more powerful than any being on the planet when he stood beside Simon Abaddon.

"Sid." Simon clucked his tongue and shook his head. "You know the answer to that question."

"But I like being with the rich. They are so shallow and gullible," Sid licked his lips. "And their servants are so tasty."

Simon chuckled and patted his small friend on the shoulder. "I know you do, Sid. Don't worry," he sighed deeply, pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes to shade his face from the annoyingly bright sun. "We'll find someone for you to devour. Come with me, Sid. We have new business."

"I thought we were going to collect from the china man, Boss." Sid followed Simon across the street, avoiding a transit bus by inches.

"I'd like to have a little fun first. Lo Chi affair is going to be a bit messy." Simon said and rapped on the door of that large silver haired woman.

Della poked her head out and screamed, "What?!"

Simon smiled mischievously. "My dear lady, you are a rapturous vision of beauty… ahhhhh… my, my."

Della placed her hand on her hips and gave Simon a sour look. "What do you want?"

"My good lady… my friend and I have an item that could bring instant notoriety to your family?"

"Oh, yeah?" Della crossed her arms and leaned against the door frame. She was interested but still guarded. "Something you're selling, I take it. Nothing's for free, buddy!"

"For a minor token…" Simon said lightly.

"I knew it!" Della raised her voice a decibel. Which

annoyed Sid to no end. He hated people with scratchy, loud voices, and dog whistles. "Mister I ain't got a pot to piss in, let alone a phone to call somebody to complain about it. What makes you think I can afford what you're selling?"

"Well, madam… payment in full can be delayed on your terms," Simon said as smooth as the hair jell he placed in his hair every morning when he woke.

"Oh, yeah," now Della was even more interested in this item. In the silver haired woman's mind was that she would never pay for this item.

"Barring any accident… or untimely death, that is." Simon added, wagging a crooked finger at the woman.

"What?" Della was confused for a second until she realized he may have been kidding her. She chuckled. "Oh. I get it. Okay."

"May we step inside to show you this item?" Simon flashed her his infectious smile.

"I don't know," Della was now eyeing Sid, partly disgusted by his appearance, partly weirded out by his unusual body movements. Whose eyes were bugging out, and salivating. "Is he alright?"

"My assistant is fine, madam," Simon leaned in and whispered. "He's my kid sister's son. Can't find work, being a little touched in the head. I take pity on the poor fellow."

"Oh, yeah," Della nodded. "I got retards in my family too. I blame my Father's screwed up DNA, y'know?" She rolled her eyes and blew a half-hearted raspberry. "Yeah, sure. Come on in. Watch for dog shit. My Poodle is a little sick. Don't know what's wrong with him. I think he ate some washing powder."

Sid went first and Simon followed reluctantly. "How-uh-charming," he flashed a smile.

Inside the small house were three rooms and an upstairs. The kitchen was the size of a cubby hole and next

to it was the dining room/living room and study. The place was a mess just as Simon expected. There was an old man in his underwear sitting in a torn vinyl chair, smoking and watching TV. At the table in the dining room, an elderly lady in a bright red evening gown and candy striped pajamas. She was trying to eat oatmeal and read the newspaper. More oatmeal landed on the newspaper than in her toothless mouth.

Up on the mantle in the study, Simon noticed some glass trinkets. Most of them were circus animals, and a few were of ballerinas and cowboys on horses. Behind the old man was a shelf of more trinkets made of bone china. Children from Campbell's soup sitting in oversized bowls or cups, advertising the soup company on the side.

"Well?" Della, brushed back strands of her silver hair from her eyes and said curtly: "What do you got for me?"

"I have the most beautiful item you will ever lay your eyes on," Simon pulled a statuette from his coat. Made of pewter, painted with bright colors of orange and blue. This man in a bowler hat and suit, and the woman in a simple dress, huddled under an umbrella the man turned and kissed the woman, then went back to their usual stiff stance holding each other by the waist.

Della gasped. "How did….how did you do that?" She whispered, entranced by the statuette.

"Magic," Simon said and Sid immediately burst in laughter, which he stifled by throwing a hand over his mouth. "Magic my dear woman. You can have this wonderful item. Show it to your neighbors and be instantly recognized for it."

3

Winston Daniels blinked and smiled at the young lady. "I'm sorry," he said. "Did you just say something?"

The woman couldn't have been more than eighteen years of age, had skin as smooth as milk, and long strawberry blond hair. She leaned in to Winston, the cleavage of her sun dress expanded. "I asked if I could sit here." The woman giggled vibrantly.

I don't recall hearing anyone saying anything, Winston thought. Why did the train stop here, of all places? True it was an odd spot, and if anyone was driving through, they would have missed this depot. He looked at his watch. It said 9:30pm. Where did the time go?

"Oh, I'm sorry." Winston moved his briefcase from the seat. The train bounced and the young woman nearly fell on top of him. Again, her cleavage managed to be in direct contact with Winston's eyes.

"Oh, my," the young woman said in a soft, southern drawl. "I seem to be in your personal space once again." She giggled and sat very close to Winston.

Winston wasn't in the least bit uneasy about the situation. This was the highlight of his trip From Atlanta to Richmond, VA, to deliver the suitcase to his business partner. He didn't trust the mail services, nor his business partner. He had to deliver it by hand. Olga had begged him not to take the trip, but he knew it was imperative he get his designs to the Devers Company before Hamilton Cross did, a rival architect. They had been rivals for ten years, and not once, had Cross been able to steal an account from him. He hated flying. Actually he was terrified of flying. Olga did however fly into a fit and screamed at the top of her lungs

she would do something drastic if he left. He took it as an empty threat. Just one of many she has made in the twenty years of marriage.

"Well." Winston raised his eyebrow. "We might as well get to know each other if you are going to keep invading my personal space." He smiled sheepishly and the young woman laughed, tossed a few strands of her hair out of her eyes.

"Yes," she giggled again. "We should. My name is Lara Foley. What's yours?" Lara moved her hand to shake Winston's, brushing his knee.

"Oh." He took her hand, shook it gingerly. "I'm Winston Holmes. Are you traveling far?"

"Meeting a friend in Richmond." Lara fluttered her eyes.

"Is that so?" Winston laughed, shook his head. "What a coincident. I too am going to Richmond. That was a very strange place the train picked you up in. Do you live far from there?"

"It is in the boonies, isn't it? No. As a matter of fact I missed the train in Wilmington. I had a cab drive me there and the driver just barely made it as the train pulled in."

"I've ridden this route many times. Never has the train stopped there. Could this friend be of the male species?"

"As a matter of fact no. But, looking at your hand, I see you are married," Lara stated.

The smile disappeared from Winston's face. He coughed. "Uh, well." He tried to hide his hand. "As a matter of fact, I'm in the middle of a divorce. It's just habit I put it on."

"That's a good thing, for you, that is." Lara glanced at her compact mirror and fixed her lipstick.

"How so?" Winston was perplexed.

"I'll let you share a drink with me in my cabinet."

"That's… very sudden," Winston said.

Lara stood, grabbed her suitcase. "I'm a very impetuous person." She began to walk away, when she looked back and saw Winston still sitting in his seat, looking flummoxed. "Well?" She barked. "Are you coming?"

Winston grabbed his briefcase and trotted behind Lara down the narrow hallway, jumping other passenger's legs and feet as if they were hurdles. He caught up with Lara, and gently, but firmly, took her suitcase from her. They crossed three links of carts before reaching her cabinet. She placed the key in the lock. Winston quickly dropped his briefcase to turn the door knob for Lara. But a nail hanging from the slim doorframe scraped the skin from palm of his hand. Winston drew his hand back and yelped. Blood flowed from the open wound to Winston's cufflink.

Lara gasped. "You poor baby." She took him by the hand and led him inside her cabinet. She forced him to sit on her bed, while at the same time producing a handkerchief from her purse and wrapping it around his hand.

"It is true," Winston said. "Women are better at doing many things at once."

"Oh." Lara went to the door. "Don't worry," she whispered, then pursed her lips. She picked up her suitcase and his briefcase and kicked the door shut. "You'll see how well I multitask in bed.

Suddenly, Winston was distressed. "I'm not sure we should do this. Do you?"

"Oh, yes. I'm very certain we should do this, Winston. I feel it in my bones." Lara sat her suitcase on a desk, opened it, and retrieved a long, red candle and a saucer. She placed them on the desk.

"Say…what's the candle for?" Winston asked.

"It's for when the lights go out, silly. I want to watch

our shadows in a wicked, passionate embrace."

Winston laughed. He stood and removed his jacket, undid his tie and top button on his shirt. He stopped on the second button, lost in thought. "Wait," he said. "Aren't we going to have a drink?"

Lara reached around her back, pulled down the zipper on her sundress. She let the sundress fall around her legs and stepped out of it. "I don't think we're going to need that drink." She lit the candle as the lights went out.

Funny, Winston thought. I didn't see her touch the light switch.

4

In the morning, Winston awoke with much perturbation. He knew he'd done wrong, and this was not the first time he had cheated on Olga. Thankfully, Olga never knew about the other women, and hopefully, she will not know about this one.

Winston rubbed his tired eyes. With blurry vision, he saw the outline of Lara's nightdress hanging in mid-air by the desk. He screwed in his eyes again with a knuckle and there she was, in her nightdress, cutting the bloody handkerchief that had been around his wounded hand, into small pieces. The candle was still burning, but the wick was still intact, and none of the wax had melted. The plate underneath it was clean. Winston shook his head. Must be a new candle he thought.

He rose from the bed. "Good morning," he said.

Lara didn't answer him. She kept her back to him. She reached for three small glass containers. One looked like it contained hair. The second looked like semen. The third looked like water or perspiration. Lara poured each of the contents into a larger glass container that now had the pieces of the bloody handkerchief.

"I see how this is turning out," Winston said. He finished dressing, and began to fix his tie. "I must have said or did something wrong." In spite of how Lara was acting, Winston decided to get one cuddle in before she asked him to leave. He went to her, threw his arms around her. She poured the concoction on top of the candle. A puff of smoke ensued and the flame rose higher. "Here, what is that you are doing? I hope you don't think that's the way you make coffee…"

Lara was no longer in the nightgown. It was empty and was now rumpled in Winston's hands. Winston glanced at the nightgown, looked up and there was Hamilton Cross standing before him. Winston glanced at his hands and found the nightgown not only gone, but his arms were around Hamilton Cross's waist. Horrified and stunned, Winston took a few steps backwards, tripping over grunts and coughs that should have been words coming from his quivering lips.

"Have a nice time, old boy?" Cross said, laughed malevolently. "Oh, come now, lover boy. You can do better than that."

Winston felt an unexplainable amount of heat on his face, then a surging pain under his eyelids. Just as the wax on the candle burned into large heaps and gathered on the small plate under it, so too did the skin on Winston's face burn away in quick successions.

***

Hamilton Cross followed the other passengers as they left the train and made their way through droves of other people in the train station in Richmond.

"Hamilton?" He heard a woman call out to him. He turned and saw Olga behind him. He walked over and kissed her. "I understand that it worked?"

Cross smiled. "Like a charm," he said.

5

Two weeks later, the front door of the office swung open violently.

Hamilton Cross rushed in and picked up a chair. He held it over his right shoulder and tossed it at the wall. I ducked just in time as the chair bounced and fell behind me. I hopped out of my swivel chair and ran to a corner. I was boxed in by my desk and book case. I didn't mean to. But then again, he had me whichever direction I ran.

Mungo was gone shopping. Note to self: Mungo shops when I'm at home with locked doors.

"You fucking bitch!" Cross screamed.

"What?" I squealed. "What did I do?!"

Honestly, I didn't remember.

"The spell? Or should I say spells!" He breathed heavily, his chest heaved, and his rumpled track suit followed.

Uh-oh. Now I remember. He wasn't supposed to.

"What are you talking about? I did what you asked. I created Lara, an eighteen year old girl for the mark to follow her in her cabinet!"

"Lara was not supposed to be me! You fucking bitch!" He kicked my desk, sending it toward me.

I screamed, threw my hands over my mouth, muffling it. All of this for three thousand dollars? Hell, he ended up with the wife of a business rival and they ended up with the company and millions. What was the problem?

"C'mon…it was just sex…" I shrugged. "I got the feeling you kinda liked it," I giggled.

"I'm not a fag!" He ran toward me, jumped on my desk and stepped off. I tried to think of a spell to keep me

from being killed, but nothing was coming to me. He threw a right cross that caught me under my left eye. I fell backwards against the wall, hit my head. I felt a terrible surging pain back there and I knew I had split my head open. I slid down to a crouching position, everything became hazy.

Heavy footsteps came running in the office. I saw Mungo behind Cross, one-two punch combination struck Cross in his back and neck. He fell forward, almost on top of me. Mungo grabbed hold of the back of his track suit and swung him into the far wall, knocking Cross on his ass and several framed pictures came tumbling on top of him.

Cross was out cold.

Mungo took hold of Cross by his pants legs and dragged him across the office floor, to the open front door and tossed in the gutter by the bus stop. At first, Mungo was so nonchalant about the whole situation. Just doing his duty as my protector and assistant. When Cross landed in the gutter, Bovey rose up from a bush, bottle of cheap wine in one hand and a Bahama Mama sausage in the other.

"Getting so a fella can't have his breakfast in peace!" Bovey got to his feet and waddled away drunkenly.

When Mungo came back inside, his face said everything. He stood in the doorway of the office, arms folded, his dark brow crumpled down in the shape of a v.

"I know," I said, sitting in my chair, holding a paper towel to my cut lip, dabbing the blood away every now and then. "To answer your question, Mungo," I sucked on my bottom lip, washed the blood around in my mouth, and then spat it out on the floor. "I don't why I did that to Cross."

"You have a bad habit of putting yourself in a corner," Mungo growled.

"Yeah," I said, touching my busted lips with a finger. I flinched and sighed. "In the future, it might be wise to have Raja protect the shop in the daytime as well as the night."

Mungo left the office and went into the kitchen. "I will start on lunch," he called out.

Shit! He was right. Have the invisible dog protect the shop, even when we are here. The way the world is anymore, you can't trust anything or anyone, human and non-human.

6

Six months ago…

Tom heard the thumping first.

He stirred from an already disturbing dream, sat up in bed and listened. Thump. Thump. Thump. Tom gasped. He felt his heart rise up in his throat and his hands began to shake.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"Oh, God," he whispered.

Holly was lying beside him, sound asleep, as she always did after sex. She always came home from the realty office, tired, stressed out, and her feet aching from those horrible heels that her boss Lorraine demanded she wear, because; quote-unquote: "You have the best legs out of all of us except Robert."

Tom would get home first, from his woodwork shop only a mile from the house they've just moved into. He would start supper, have Holly's drink ready as soon as she walked through the front door. She would have two more Scotch and soda's and then force Tom to have kitchen sex. They would eat, watch a little TV, and go to bed. Tom and Holly would have to have sex again, then fall asleep. Tom would lie there for an hour or so, wondering why he'd become the less dominate mate when it was Holly who was the one being chased, caught and had doubts about marriage.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Tom heard it again. He touched Holly's shoulder with a nervous hand. She stirred and softly moaned. "No, Tom. Not again. I'm sore as it is and I have to get up early for a meeting at the office." Quickly, she fell asleep again,

drowning out those wretched tree frogs with her ear-piercing snoring.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Tom gulped, pulled the covers over his eyes. He prayed that the burglar, devil, menacingly rabid squirrel - or whoever it was… did not kill him first without letting him plead his case to stay among the living. He reached toward holly's shoulder once more and shook her violently.

"What?!" She screamed, rose from her pillows, fire shooting from her flared nostrils.

"I hear something," Tom said weakly.

"Go to **SLEEP**!" Holly angrily fluffed her pillows.

"But," Tom croaked in a slight whisper. "I heard a noise."

"**SLEEP**!" She grunted.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Holly rose from her pillows, blinked a few times. "What was that?" She asked.

7

Mungo kicked me out of the office.

So I went to see my best friend, Jeanie Stanford. I've known her since eighth grade when she wore coke-bottle glasses and had pimples the size of boulders all over her pasty face. Jeanie worked for the local newspaper, Sundial Post. Sundial isn't even the name of the town we live in. Some hot shot ex-reporter quit his job at the New York Post and moved here in Augustus, decided to start his own newspaper to challenge The Auggie Examiner. That was seventy years ago and the Auggie examiner was bought by that man after the Examiner almost folded in the mid-eighties. Jeanie got her start writing a recipe column for the Examiner when she left college. Now she she's a feature writer with a by-line and everything. She's also my personal researcher.

"I am not your personal researcher," Jeanie said, taking a spoonful of vanilla from my hot fudge Sunday.

"Look, I just want a little information on Hamilton Cross," I said, finishing my Chocolate Sundae.

"I don't see you for a month and you think you can just waltz back into my life and cause chaos again, little missy?"

Uggh! I hate when she calls me little missy! Jeanie is mimicking a sixth grade teacher I had who called me that whenever I interrupted her class, which I admit, was frequent. I still hate Geography.

"I stayed away that long for a reason." I shrugged. "I figured Albert kept you busy." I chuckled.

Albert was Jeanie's husband. And… he is a little in love with me because I accidently spilled some love powder on his shoulder one day when they were in my shop. I still

haven't gotten around to removing the spell, seems more fun that way. Jeanie is still pissed at me.

"That's not funny, Evelina," Jeanie folded her arms used her eyes to send daggers my way. "You cast that spell on purpose."

"Jeanie… no. I love you," I touched her arm and she quickly pushed it away. "I don't always do things on purpose… kind of… accidently on purpose."

"Like Hamilton Cross?" She asked.

I sighed. "Okay," I said. "You got me there, Jeanie. I don't know why I do the things I do. I guess I love trouble."

"I'll say you do! Remember what you did to Calvin Lorie's mother?"

"She had it coming to her. She never liked me." I rolled my eyes. Jeanie laughed again, dying to tell the story one more time.

"At the county fair, you didn't just cast a spell for her skirt to rise up every time she moved… no. You also had to make her panties disappear and gave her a bladder problem!" Jeanie doubled over laughing, her small eyes squinting.

"I know what I did, Jeanie. I paid for it."

"We all paid for it here in the county, Evelina. It rained toads for a week. That silly reporter from Newsweek came here looking for answers to 'mystery', as he put it."

"He wasn't silly, Jeanie. He got you on at the paper as an intern. Your foot in the door."

Jeanie scoffed. "Well, he got his foot in my door."

"What? You never told me that."

"I didn't tell anyone. Except Albert."

"Wow," I giggled. "How was it with a fifty year old man?" I laughed wildly.

"Way different from your first time. He was actually pretty good… I was smitten. And I was destroyed when I never heard from him."

"Ohhhh… that's why I didn't see very much of you that summer," I said.

"Yah, well… not many people saw much of me that summer, Evelina. Not even my parents." Jeanie thought for a second, then decided to change the subject. "Hey, what do you want to know about Hamilton Cross?"

"Who is he? Are there any articles on him? He claimed he was engaged to Winston Daniel's widow."

"Olga Daniels?" Jeanie scrunched her nose up, disapproving of the marital arrangement.

"Yeah," I said.

"So soon after Winston died. Hmm. That's crazy. Well, I do know that he worked as a personal secretary for Winston. Olga I sort of know. I interviewed her for the paper about her 'Garden of Delights' contest. I also know that most contest winners are still waiting on the rest of the payment from Olga."

"How much was she offering?" I asked.

"Five thousand dollars for the best looking garden design," Jeanie said.

"Why would she skimp out on contest winners? She has millions."

"Good question. Hey, I have to run. Albert and I are taking his mother to dinner tonight. I'll text to let you know what info I gather on Hamilton Cross. I have to go. I have to write a follow up column about Sheriff Lewis' wife Maude. You remember she died in a car wreck last year?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "I remember that. Sad. Thank you, Jeanie. For your help."

Jeanie smiled at me. "No problem. You know I love you like a sister. And you get on my nerves like a sister would!"

We laughed and hugged. She waved to me as she trotted down the sidewalk away from the ice cream parlor.

8

I didn't want to go home. I was still a little shaken from the incident with Hamilton Cross. Why did I get involved up with that jerk? I do things and I just don't know why I do them. No voice pops into my head and says, "Oh, no, little missy, don't do that!"

I didn't want to go home and face Mungo's judgement, too.

Mungo is a good person. He took care of my father, and took care of my grandfather. He nursed my mother while she was dying in her bed and has taken care of me since I was born. His father took care of many generations of Giles ever since we were in wales. Good people, always ready to help others. Shunned by society because of their deformities, centuries of service from Mungo's people have created blessings for them. Such as Mungo being so big and strong. His father was blessed with great intelligence and a gift for Magi-sciences. His grandfather was gifted with the ability to pass through walls and see truthful souls.

My family was only cursed with casting spells.

I say cursed because whatever the spell is, there is a price to pay.

Of course I could just go home, curl up on the couch with a Lifetime movie and drink a bottle of wine while Mungo stays in his room and listen to old-time radio shows. No, that would be a wasted evening. If I am going to drink, I need to be in the right atmosphere. The Hypnosis is a real bar, not a sports bar, and the atmosphere is downright dangerous, filled with cigarette smoke and enough gun smoke to make the county cops stay on their toes.

I sat at a table in the back around the pool tables.

Two guys were tussling over who was going to open the game. Feng-Shu screamed at them. Like two little boys, they immediately stood, looked ashamed. They found a table across from me, began drinking beers the previous customers left.

"Here's your whiskey sours. Double," Feng-Shu said in broken English and angrily dropped the tumblers on the table. "You pay now in case your boyfriend comes to talk to you and he beat you in the street and I never get my money!"

"I don't have a boyfriend," I rumbled through my purse and found a fifty. I slapped it on the table. "Keep these fuckers coming, okay?"

"You don't have a boyfriend?" Feng-Shu snatched up the Ulysses S. Grant. "If he's not your boyfriend, then why is he staring at you so intensely?"

Jesus. It was Hamilton Cross sitting at the bar with three empty beer glasses in front of him, nursing a fourth. I sighed, shook my head. "He probably wants to kill me."

Feng-Shu gave me a distressed look and a startled glance at Cross. He wiped his forehead and whistled. "Good thing I got my money first!" He exclaimed, as he shuffled off into the kitchen.

Cross was staring at me, those dark eyes burning a hole into my soul.

Drinking always makes me a little paranoid. I think that stems from years ago when Jeanie and I were in her father's closet getting hammered on Jack Daniels. We were fifteen and every little noise we thought was her father's heavy footsteps. He never did catch us. But on that sleepover, we were puking our guts out. He thought both of us had the flu. Maybe because I was already drunk, but I felt like he was trying to see what my next move was going to be.

Sheriff Lewis burst through the door. Everyone in the bar immediately hid their faces or turned their backs to

him. Lewis scanned the room to see if he recognized anyone. He made a b-line for Cross. Cross had moved his eyes away from me to his stout. Lewis stood there, one hand on his gun, the other on his belt, waiting for Cross to address him. Finally, after a few minutes, Cross did.

"Can I help you, Sheriff?" Cross wheezed out the words faintly.

"We need to talk, Cross." The tone was not friendly, but I had a good idea they knew each other very well.

"My mouth is tied up right now," Cross slurred. "I'm busy drinking. As you can see."

"We need to go outside." Sheriff Lewis was agitated. I could tell he was someone who didn't like to be told no. His thumb was caressing the hammer of his gun. "Damn it, boy…," Lewis snarled. "You're going to give me what I want…"

"Are you going to arrest me, Sheriff?" Cross looked Lewis up and down.

Lewis spat on the floor. "Don't give me a reason," he replied.

I thought I was watching a very bad western. The acting was definitely not convincing from both sides. Neither man had any intention of tussling. It was all talk, and almost laughable at that. For some reason the bar started playing Emmylou Harris; version of *Together again*. Lewis jerked his head toward the bar, angry, but his lips started to quiver. His eyes began to water and the retinas become red with irritation. After the song ended, he slowly turned to Cross.

He leaned in and said, "You better take a cab, boy," he wiped tears from his eyes, sniffled. "I'm going to be watching this bar like a hawk. If you get in that Camaro, I'm swoopin' down on you before you start the engine. Got it?"

Drunkenly, Cross nodded his head. Boldly, he smiled and said, "You can go now, Sheriff Lewis. I'm sure your wife

needs you at home."

With that, Lewis stomped out of the bar. He didn't have anything else to add. Hmmm… What a shitty thing to say. I thought Sheriff Lewis' wife was dead.

Cross and I locked eyes. I quickly looked away. I didn't want to give him an invitation to come to my table. Of course, that's exactly what happened. He sat down clumsily without asking, cradling a bottle of Red, White, and Blue to his chest as if it were a newborn he was protecting.

"You heard all that," he stated. What was I supposed to have heard? He acted like it was information about JFK's assassination.

I just nodded. My head was heavy. I wanted to lay it on that table and burry my face in the grain.

"What you heard isn't true," Cross said, slammed his bottle hard on the table. I jumped away from the table, slid my chair back some. Beer fizzed out of the top all over his hands. He shook it off, his eyes were scoured as they focused on me. "No." He pointed a finger at me. "No…after what you did to me… no. You don't get the privilege of being afraid of me."

"It's not a privilege, you asshole," I told him. "It's a fact."

"So… why don't you wave your wand and turn me into a little spider… stomp on me?"

"Magic doesn't work that way. I mean… it does," I tried to explain it. My head was pounding, possible more so from talking to the idiot, than being drunk. I felt like a Nuclear Physicist trying to explain how chocolate bars are made to an offensive lineman. Going around and around in circles until I die of an aneurism. "Every time I cast a spell… Something has to happen or happens to me… the person or persons around me…"

"Talking about bad luck," Cross said and drank from

his bottle.

I shrugged and shook my head. "Not exactly." I finished off my whiskey, turned the shot glass upside down, and pretended I was watching a tiny spider named Hamilton Cross trapped under it. "Why are you here, at my table, talking to me?"

"I feel bad about what happened earlier. I was… really mad."

"I could tell."

"I've been told, in the past, that I have anger problems."

"They were just pulling your leg," I said and we both shared a laugh.

"Is that so?" He eyed me. Again. Daggers piercing through me. "My Dad, my Priest, my Gym teacher, and the Naval Psychiatrist - who recommended the Navy cut me loose nine months after I joined - they were all pranking me?"

"Well, Gym teacher wasn't. Let me guess, you didn't want to do laps around the football field? You two argued. He called you a name, you called him one and you two wrestled, you hit him by accident. Laid him out cold."

"How did you know that?" He was looking at me like I'd seen the events in a crystal ball.

"I'm guessing," I said. "I'm pretty good at guessing about people."

"I see that," Cross said. "You guess weights as well?"

"Only on the weekends and just for beer money. Haven't turned pro yet."

Cross laughed. We were quiet for a bit, staring at our glasses. Most of bar's patrons had left by that time. Feng-Shu had even left, letting a pretty blonde with a nose ring tend bar. She looked barely old enough to buy alcohol, let alone sell it. She kept making eyes at Cross and that was bugging

me. So I moved my chair closer to him, leaned in a little closer whenever he spoke, even flirted more by giggling at everything he said. That wasn't hard to do, since I was already stone cold drunk. Hell, I was laughing at the way the table was shaped.

Then I realized the girl wasn't looking at him, but at me. That made me uncomfortable. Furthermore, when she bought us another round, I better still understood she was looking at both of us, and tried very hard to place herself in a hopeful threesome.

That weirded me out even more.

I knew I shouldn't have done this, but I couldn't help myself.

I grabbed him by his shirt, and pulled him toward me and kissed him. During the kiss, I looked up to see if the girl was watching. She was. Her gaze became more intense as she wiped down a beer glass, and she parted her lips as if she were moved to an orgasm. That's when I manoeuvred a fly that had been buzzing around the bar, right into her mouth. I heard the girl gagging and choking. She dropped the beer mug, it shattered in several pieces on the wood floor. She placed her hands on her throat, trying in vain to hack the bug up as she ran off to the woman's restroom.

Cross pulled away, his eyes darted back and forth between me and the commotion with the bartender. He stared at me for a moment. I smiled at him half-sheepishly, half-over confident, arrogant. I sat back in my chair, blissfully folded my arms. "You didn't like what I did?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm trying to figure that out," Cross said, still stunned by my actions. "There's an angle here," he added.

"If you don't trust me now, you never will."

"Yeah," he said. "I don't trust you."

Wow. That was a clever blow below the belt. I

deserved it.

"Well." I rose from my chair. "There's nothing I can do for you then."

"Wait." Cross sighed, touched my arm, pulled away impulsively. "Yes… I'm sure…" He shook his head, bit his lower lip. "I need your help," he blurted out.

Slowly, I sat back in my chair, crossed my legs haphazardly, bumping a table leg. "With what?"

"I'm being blackmailed."

"About what? The death of Winston Daniels? I read about it in paper this morning. You used my spell wrong." I said. He didn't say anything. He looked back at his glass, shrugged. "So you're being blackmailed. About Daniels?"

Cross nodded. "Yes. And… the fact… you made me… into a…"

"Into a what?" I pressed him.

"A seventeen year old girl," he blurted out. Cross looked around to make sure no one was listening.

I immediately began to giggle. I covered my mouth to stop it. He cut his eyes at me. "I'm sorry," I begged his forgiveness. "I'm sorry… it's the booze, I swear." After I contained the giggles, I cleared my throat and asked: "Who else knows? Besides Winston Daniels widow?"

"Your assistant." Cross sniffed. "He's the only one I know…"

"Mungo's not going to do that. He works for me. Hell," I shrugged. "He lives for me."

"Okay." Cross nodded. "I don't know who it is."

"How are they contacting you? Letters?"

"No." He pulled out his phone from his left front pocket. "Text messages." Cross showed me the text on his phone.

999-698-6054

Mr. Cross, very naughty hiring a witch to get rid your girlfriend's husband. I will not tell for a price.

"Did you look up that number?" I asked.

"Of course." Cross sniffed the air arrogantly. He was swaying in his chair. "Not a known number in any online directories. I'm not even sure if 999 is a real area code in the U.S."

"I see you answered."

"Yes. I was angry. How could I not be?"

"Well." I shrugged. "You didn't have to call them a cocksucker."

Cross nodded. "Oh yes I did. As a matter of fact I wished them to spend an eternity in hell to suck cocks there, too."

"I see you wrote that," I said. "Have they contacted you again?"

He was slow to answer. He was getting angrier just by discussing it.

"Hey." I touched his arm and rubbed gently. "Take it easy, okay? I'm just asking questions. I'm partly doing this for a fee, partly because I feel bad about… the practical joke I played on you."

Cross recoiled, jerked his arm from my hand and snarled. "Stop bringing that up!"

"Okay." I threw my hands up to block any punches he might have thrown. "Okay. No problem. Just tell me what's going on now."

"Yeah." He sighed, his tense face eased up slightly. "They sent another text message."

999-698-6054

Mr. Cross, meet me at Howard's Park at 9:30am Tuesday.

Not showing up, would be a bad idea.

"What happened, then?" I handed the phone back to him.

"Whoever it is, they didn't show," Cross said.

"Okay. That's strange. Does Winston's Widow know about this?"

"Olga," he said.

"Okay. Her name is Olga. She knows?"

"No. Nor does she know… about the incident." He bit his lower lip.

He called it an incident, oh my God! I almost laughed, but I contained it, moving my mouth around so he didn't see I was greatly amused.

"They threatened to tell her," he shook his head. "In the next text message, if I didn't do what I was told."

"Which is?" I prompted Cross to go on after a moment's silence.

"They want twenty thousand dollars. Like I said, I was ready to pay. I went to the meeting place and…the person never showed. Too weird."

"Yeah," I said. "Too weird."

9

Something bad happened.

I awoke with that horrible feeling my head had ballooned and would float up into the atmosphere taking my limp body along. I opened my eyes, stared at the ceiling, focusing on a very small black spider that was trying desperately to crawl up the giant web it had spun for itself. At the very top of the web was a huge water bug. I imagined this water bug wandered into the web by accident. Maybe that's the way my life is. A barrage of accidental wanderings. Or, is it that huge spider web I'd spun for myself, I can't seem to crawl to the top to get what I want.

I pulled back my comforter and discovered I was naked. I don't normally sleep without a nightgown or some clothing. Maybe it was so hot I had to strip down. Then again, I don't remember much of the previous night. I was so shitfaced I probably passed out after I tried to dress for bed.

Then I made another discovery.

Someone else was in my bed. A man, sound asleep, snoring paint off the walls of my bedroom. That someone was naked also. That someone was Hamilton Cross.

Cross stirred, opened his eyes, licked his lips and slowly turned toward me. He stared, nothing registering for a second or two. But when it did, the reaction was huge. He sat up quickly and gasped. He tried to speak several times, only his tongue would wrap around his vocal chords.

My bedroom door flew open. Mungo stood there gripping the doorknob and bellowed, "You need to get out of bed!" Mungo saw Cross. Panic was replaced by sheer anger. Both of Mungo's fists formed into two huge mason

bricks. He held them high in the air ready to strike Cross or anything in his way. He took three steps inside, stopped, and decided to retreat back downstairs to the shop. "Come downstairs now!"

We made our way downstairs as Mungo had commanded, both dressed, possibly overdressed. We sat on a small couch in a small sitting room that led to the shop. Mungo glared at me, showing his fatherly dissatisfaction at my latest stab at hijinks.

"We've been robbed," Mungo said. His voice had returned to normal gravely deep throat, barely above a whisper.

"What was taken?" I let panic invade my own speech, which came out as more of screech than vocalized shock.

Mungo tossed a purple hatbox at me. The lid fell to my feet and the box on Cross's lap. Cross glanced at it, haphazardly dropped the box in my lap.

"Oh no!" I smacked a cushion that was lying on the end table with a lamp. "For fuck's sake, Mungo! The alarm didn't sound!" We locked eyes, Mungo flashed a smile. Realizing this, he jumped back into his stone faced character. Mungo trotted to the backdoor with the window broken out. Cross and I followed.

"So, what's this about an alarm…"

Cross tried to ask and I shushed him, placing my finger over his mouth. Again, Mungo did not like the intimacy he witnessed.

I flicked my fingers casually and a wave of reality faded out, faded back in with a wavering screen projecting choppy images of who had broken into my shop. At first a fist punched through one of the plated windows on the backdoor. A bloodied hand reached through shards of glass still attached and unlocked the door, opened it quickly. A tall, skinny, youngish white man with who was prematurely

balding, wearing a white grateful dead t-shirt and baggy green canvas shorts, hopped inside. He took three glances around my kitchen, mostly on my cabinet beside the refrigerator, and then looked behind him. A low growl was heard. The man took a dash of red cyan from the bag around his waist and a forceful bark was stifled. The man rifled through the cabinets in the kitchen and found a canister. He placed the canister into his backpack and left through the backdoor.

"He stole spells from Aunt Doris," I said.

"Your Aunt was a Witch too?" Cross asked.

"No - I mean yes - but Doris wasn't my Aunt. I bought those spells at an auction. Apparently, they'd been stolen and sold at an auction."

"So the thief found out you had them and wanted them back." Cross thought about it. He chuckled, shook his head. "Crazy. Was he kin to Doris?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

The images faded away. Mungo and I exchanged glances. I clucked my tongue and folded my arms.

Mungo sighed, looked down at his heavy black boots. "I had to go to the store. We needed groceries."

"At midnight, Mungo?" I asked, raised an eyebrow.

"I wanted Chunky Monkey," Mungo said. He kept his head bowed like a child being chastised for a naughty trick he'd played.

"He wanted what?" Cross asked. He howled with laugher.

"Shut up," I told him. "That's alright Mungo. I wasn't here either."

"I am addicted to Chunky Monkey," Mungo said. He kept his eyes on his shoes, still ashamed for leaving his post.

"I'm lost here," Cross said.

"Our security failed. The dog didn't do what it was supposed to do because we were not here. Mostly because

Mungo has deep ties to it. So if Mungo is not here, then the dog is more worried where he is than an intruder is around the shop." I patted Mungo on the back. He shot me a momentary smile and proceeded to clean up the broken glass on my kitchen floor.

"What dog? All I saw was a man break in. I heard the dog, but I didn't see him." Cross sat on my counter top and I motioned for him to get off. Cross reluctantly removed himself and leaned against the refrigerator.

"He saw the dog," I told Cross. "He stopped it from attacking him."

"Is that some sort of magical powder he threw in the air?" Cross asked.

"Only to Raja," I said.

"To who?"

"The dog. The intruder used Red Cyan pepper on Raja. Froze him. Apparently, the intruder knows his stuff."

"He looks familiar," Mungo said. Mungo finished cleaning up the glass and moved Cross away from the refrigerator. He took out a carton of eggs, Canadian bacon, and cheese. "Do you want coffee?" He asked Cross.

"Uh, yes, thank you," Cross said.

"Coffee?" Mungo asked me. I nodded, took Cross by the hand and we went to my office.

"You know, I have a hard time believing you have an invisible dog." Cross had a goofy grin on his face. He stood at my office door, peered into the shop, hoping to see all of the knick knacks and potions I sell to come to life.

"Oh really?" I snapped my fingers and Raja appeared out of thin air, a large, snarling, black dog of a hundred and seventy pounds pounced on Hamilton Cross. Cross screamed, as Raja's front paws kicked him in the chest, knocking him to the floor. Raja growled, bearing all of his teeth, ready to rip out Crosses throat on command.

"Get it off of me!" Cross screamed. "Get it off!"

"Raja," I said. The dog backed away, came and sat at my desk, faded out of our reality. "You're a believer, now aren't you?"

"Don't do that again." Cross heaved and was out of breath. He picked himself up off the floor sat at my desk.

I shrugged. "You were curious."

Mungo brought us our coffee. He gave a Styrofoam cup to cross. Cross made a face. "I don't get a real cup?"

"No," I said. "You get a real cup when Mungo likes you."

The front door opened and Jeanie stepped inside. She stood at my office door, her purse under her arm. She had a curious look on her face.

"Jeanie." I greeted her and wiped the sleep from my eyes as I sipped my coffee. "Would you like some coffee?"

Jeanie laughed. "No thank you." She watched Cross drink from his Styrofoam cup. "I don't want to freak you out, buddy, but drinking Mungo's coffee will turn your piss black."

Cross spat the coffee back into the Styrofoam cup and threw it at Mungo's boots. "Trying to poison me, you freak!" He stood and headed for the front door. "I don't think I'll be back!"

Mungo groaned, clenched his fists, stepped toward Cross. I held on to Mungo's sleeve, shook my head. He groaned again, unclenched his fists, and made his exit, brushing past Cross.

"Hamilton?" I called out to him.

He stopped just as he opened the door. "What?"

"Jeanie is just messing with you," I said.

"No I'm not!" Jeanie protested. "That coffee…"

"Jeanie." I stopped her midsentence. She sighed, sat in the chair Cross previously sat. "I'll look into that thing for

you, Hamilton."

He was puzzled at first. Then it dawned on him. "Oh. Okay. Yes. Thank you, Evelina." Cross left, closing the door gingerly.

"The hell was that about?" Jeanie asked.

"He's being blackmailed. He asked me to look into it," I said.

"And… why would you do that?"

I didn't answer her. Jeanie gasped.

"You slept with him," she stated. "I can see it in your face." I looked away, rolled my eyes. Yes, Jeanie, my oldest and dearest friend has always been able to tell when I've had sex by looking at my face, some strange reason she can read it in my expressions. That includes if I've masturbated. It is extremely annoying, and most times, embarrassing, especially if it is the latter. Jeanie has no trouble calling me out on it.

"You had sex with him," she kept repeating.

"Leave me alone," I demanded, getting angrier by the minute.

"You… had… sex… with…" Jeanie pointed to the front door Cross had just passed through. "…him?" She thought about it.

"Yes!! I had sex with Hamilton Cross!!" I shouted at her.

Just then, Mungo appeared in the doorway of my office. He groaned in disgust. He turned his back to us, shook his head. "Breakfast is ready," we heard him say as his voice died out going down the hallway.

We stood and I let Jeanie go ahead of me as we walked through the small hallway back to my kitchen and Dining room. She turned quickly to me, raised a finger in my face.

"Why would you do that?" Jeanie asked, expressing

concern for my mental state. At least that's what I got from the question.

"Just drop it, Jeanie."

We sat at the table and Mungo served us our plates of eggs and bacon, sausage gravy on biscuits.

"No." Jeanie took a bite of eggs. "I really want to know. That man, Hamilton Cross, attacked you, after you cast a spell on him - changing him into a young woman that sleeps with his girlfriend's husband." I giggled. I couldn't help myself. Anyone who mentions the spell I used on Cross, makes me laugh. I found it, and I still find it, very funny. Jeanie cut her eyes at me and I stifled the giggle, nearly spat out my bacon. Mungo brought us our cups of coffee that did not cause our piss to turn black. Jeanie carried on. "This man, who dies under mysterious circumstances." I didn't tell her that a spell of mine had a hand in killing the man for a price. I didn't want her to lose what little respect my friend had for me. "Then you sleep with hi… Hamilton Cross, that is. Did he still have a vagina or a penis?" She asked. Jeanie chewed her eggs rigorously, sipped her coffee loudly. She irritates me when she does that.

I shrugged, ate my eggs. "Honestly, I don't remember," I said.

Jeanie was taken aback by that comment. "A lame lay? Very small penis?"

"I don't know. I was drunk," I said. "I hope it was good."

"Why did you do it, Evelina?"

"I don't know why, Jeanie. I just… don't know."

"Working for him again? Blackmail, huh? Blackmailing him about what?"

"Turning him into a girl." We both burst out laughing. "At some point, he paid me a thousand dollars to look into this. I'm not sure if it was before… or after sex…"

I took out a wad of bills from my hoodie.

"Oh my God, Evelina. You are the epitome of a bad girl."

"Yeah," I said. "Seems to be my curse."

"Among other things," Jeanie said. The sarcasm was bleeding from her ears. Her tiny ears with huge loops hanging from her tiny earlobes. Why the hell was she blessed with such beautiful ears? "Oh, I have the info on Hamilton, which isn't his real name." She slurped, slammed down her cup on the table and retrieved a piece of paper from her pocket.

"We know." I finished off my eggs and Mungo took our plates. He stood over me and waited for me to finish my coffee. Just to needle him, I just held it to my lips, pulled it away, several times.

"You know?" Jeanie gave me a disappointed look. "How do you know this?"

"We were not sure. He drank the tea. We could see he was lying about a lot of things."

"He drank the tea." Jeanie chuckled. "I bet his face was all orange and everything."

"Bright red. Like I said, he's lying about so many things." I drank from my cup and Mungo snatched it from my hands. I threw my hands into the air and snarled.

"I warned her not to get into bed with him, so to speak." Mungo made a rare joke. At my expense, albeit. Still, it was a rare joke.

Jeanie laughed, shook her head. "She didn't listen, eh, Mungo?"

"She never does," he answered and headed toward the kitchen with the dishes.

"Both of you get off my ass!" I screamed and jumped from the chair.

In angry strides to my office, I heard Mungo below.

"You need to cast that spell tracker."

"Oh shit! Okay!" I called back and noticed Jeanie was right on my heels.

"Don't you want to hear what I have on Cross?" She asked. A whiny voice crept from her throat.

"Later," I said. I was preoccupied with digging through too many heavy volumes of books that laid on the top shelf of my rickety bookcase.

I opened one book, flipped through twelve hundred pages, saw nothing, closed it and a cloud of dust appeared above my head. I snatched another book, repeated the process. This went on for ten minutes or more. In that time, Jeanie tried to speak and I would raise my hand to silence her. She gave up and sat in the chair in front of my desk, crossed her legs. She had a sour look on her face, but I was on a mission. I needed to find that spell tracker and I could not have my concentration taken from me.

"Why do you need to cast a spell tracker?" Jeanie asked.

"We were burgled," Mungo told her.

"What? Where was Raja?" Jeanie pointed to the end of my desk where the invisible dog usually hangs out if we're in the shop or office.

I scoffed and flipped through another volume of *World's Greatest Literature*: a book I have never read. "Mungo had to go to the grocery store, at midnight."

Mungo hung his head in shame. "I like Chunky Monkey."

"It is addictive, Mungo," Jeanie sympathized. "And you were out with Mr. so-called-Hamilton Cross, which isn't even his real name…"

"We're not talking about me," I interrupted Jeanie. "I didn't shuck my duties," Mungo whimpered when he heard that. I stopped searching momentarily and looked at

Mungo. "Don't worry about it, Mungo." I smiled. "I screwed up too." Mungo lifted his head and flashed a rare smile to me. At that moment, I picked up a volume *Super Bowls 1967 - 1989*. A piece of construction paper slipped out, and floated to the floor. "Aha!" I let out a victory cry. I unfolded the thick paper and read over the first part quickly, stopped in the mid-sentence. "Um, both of you have to leave," I said. "I can't take a chance of this spell tracker attaching itself to either of you."

"I will go to the streets and look for our burglar," Mungo said. "I have a feeling he's a vagrant by the way he dresses."

"Good thinking," I told him. I turned to Jeanie with pleading eyes. "Jeanie?"

"No," she said right away.

"I haven't even asked…"

"No," she said in a huff.

"Jeanie…" I whined.

"No, damn it." She averted my eyes, not seeing the hurt on my face.

"Jeanie… please… " I pleaded, enunciating the please with a long, soft s.

Her eyes met with mine and she saw I was still giving her those puppy dog eyes. I might have even batted them. An expression that was hard and cruel had become soft and demure.

"What is it you want?" Jeanie gave in. She motioned with a hand, a deep sigh broke from gurgling throat.

"Give me a ride. We need to talk to Olga Daniels."

***

Reginald Bovey stumbled out of the parking lot of Fresh Foods grocery store and sat on a pile of bricks. He stared at

the pale white building with the green flat roof. He helped put up that building. At the time, back in the early eighties, Fresh Foods wasn't even thought of. The building was planned to be an office park to house two businesses and an art gallery. Mr. Richards, the man who spearheaded the operation took off for Brazil after the building was completed.

No one got paid. Bovey's construction company went belly up.

Still, Bovey and his workers had the pleasure of raiding Richards's house. Wilford Lewis was the Sheriff back then. He was okay with it. Hell, even Wilford took some paintings from the walls that turned out to be quite profitable a few years down the road. Whatever Bovey took from Richards house, it couldn't save his business nor keep his men employed. Bovey found work with other companies and did so for another six or seven years. Losing the business wasn't the reason for him becoming homeless.

It was the drinking.

Bovey lost everything. He bummed around the country before coming back to Augustus. Some friends tried to help Bovey get straight. Some acted as if they never knew him. Bovey had no illusions he could change his life. Living in the past wasn't exactly what he liked either; sometimes he had no choice where his mind wandered. He just wanted to stay drunk. Being drunk was a constant hum of nothing. Bovey liked nothing.

Bovey was, however, tired of living on the street and he wished to see his daughter he hadn't spoken to in twelve years. He knew she had a son named Phillip and he was in high school back then. Bovey's daughter Jill, was no longer married. The man left when Phillip was young. Jill lived with other men, usually heavy drinkers. Bovey wanted to be with Jill.

He wanted to make up for lost time and with money, he could possibly buy a farm somewhere and she and Bovey, along with Phillip, live on that farm; that is, if Phillip didn't already have a family of his own. That's why Bovey had a cell phone. He knew that cell phone belonged to that weird hippy guy. He'd heard the weird hippy guy talking on it, and he heard a woman's voice mentioning Hamilton Cross. He also saw the weird hippy guy break into that shop with all the odd voodoo stuff. Ten minutes later, the weird hippy guy ran out of the shop and dropped his phone.

Bovey knew something about Hamilton Cross. He heard voices talking about Cross and he had slept with a man. So he sent a text message to the number listed as Hamilton Cross. He asked for twenty thousand dollars. Cross agreed.

Bovey took the phone out of his lime-green jacket and responded to Cross.

I'll meet you at the corner of Delaney and Brookshire.

Cross responded back:

I'll be there in five minutes.

Bovey put the phone away and started for Delaney. He heard something bang against the dumpster he usually slept behind. Bovey turned and saw a long gash across the steel dumpster.

"What the hell…?" Bovey whispered.

Then he heard something swiping in the air. He didn't see anyone. Bovey chalked it up to the drinking too much Mad dog 20-20. When he drank a whole bottle of Mad dog he saw all kinds of things other people don't see. Bovey had seen lots of strange things, but this… yeah… this, took the cake.

He heard footsteps on the pavement running toward him. Bovey gasped, took off in a sprint. Suddenly, his legs felt like rubber. Bovey tripped over on his own feet. He

placed both hands on the pavement as he fell to break the fall.

One hand rolled and Bovey fell on the right side of his face. He grunted as he swung his shoulder to the right and then his body to continue the tumble. Bovey ended up on his back, facing his unseen attacker. An invisible weapon sliced the air and came down fast across Bovey's chest, splitting his chest in half. Blood pulsated from the open wound and ran quickly on the pavement, forming a red puddle.

Bovey gurgled, drew in his last breath, and saw the world fade from his eyes as he sighed.

Part 2

"Cyril's Ashes"

10

The room was quiet.

Gus sat in his chair looking through the evening paper, thinking how wonderful it was so peaceful. He knew his sister Anna was in the kitchen preparing supper. She was very quiet. Even while in the bathroom or late at night. Gus never heard her footsteps, or the two cats that boarded with them in their townhouse.

Usually he heard the neighbor next door, but Cyril was dead, and yes, this sounds terrible, Gus wasn't the least bit sorry about it. Cyril was a pain in the ass. He borrowed dishes and cookware and never brought them back. He ran his TV day and night with the volume at top level. He washed clothes at 3am. Gus's room was next to the laundry room. The man threw a party every Thursday, celebrating a dead aunt that had left him a small fortune.

"Aunt Doris was a terrible old witch," he would say whenever Gus would knock on his door and demand the party be stopped.

"You have to understand, Gus," Cyril said, looking up to the dark sky above. "I did, however, scream to the Gods above, 'I will have a party in her memory!' Alas, I picked Thursday. The day that she died. Every Thursday, the day the insufferable witch died. You don't want me to renege on a promise, do you?"

"Does it have to be so loud?" Gus enunciated loud to the extreme, his eyes bugging out of his fat, thick head.

"Yes." Cyril chuckled. "That's the point, my friend! She lived a quiet, filthy life. I shall celebrate her death loudly, and cleanly, every Thursday. Forgive me. I have a party to host!" With that, Cyril slammed the door in Gus' face.

Gus always walked away with an excruciating headache.

The man told the lewdest of jokes. Even in the presence of Gus's sister. Anna always laughed at them, no matter how blue they were. He always made a point to be around Anna, whether in the hallway, or out in the parking lot. And he was always touching her, smiling at Anna. She was nice about it, but seemed uncomfortable around Cyril, or looked that way. Gus wasn't sure. There were times Anna was attentive to Cyril.

Gus couldn't stand that. Anna and he had lived together for ten years. She moved in after Ellen passed on from battling cancer. Anna knew Gus needed taking care of. Ellen did a wonderful job caring for her older brother. Gus wasn't one to do much for himself, not eating right, or pressing his suits. A man who owns his own real estate business had to look nice. Gus knew he needed Anna, even though he didn't express that to her in the right way.

It was just last month Cyril had passed away.

Gus awoke the next morning to an ambulance and fire trucks parked in front of the townhouse. Gus walked out into the parking lot and asked an EMT.

"He had heart problems, it seems. You next of kin or something?" The round man said.

Gus shook his head no and smiled vaguely. "I'm a neighbor."

"Must've been close. I can tell by your demeanor," the round man said.

Gus couldn't tell if the round man was being factious or actually caring.

He looked like a blueberry, Gus had thought. How in hell can he be someone who has to save lives in that sort of shape? What if a gunshot victim was in need of care and they lived on the top floor? They would die before he

finished half a flight of stairs.

"Do you know any of his family or friends?" The round man moved out of the way when two other men rolled a gurney out of another vehicle and into Cyril's townhouse.

"Um, no. I'm afraid not. Look, are they the…?" Gus pointed at the round man's colleagues.

"Yeah," said the round man and spit a long stream of snot in a bush. "They are taking him to the morgue. Let me guess! You are fan of the recently deceased and you wanna ride there to witness the carving?"

"I most certainly am not and do not wish that at all, young man!" Gus sputtered. He turned, left for the front door of his townhouse.

"It's okay, grandpa Dracula." He heard the round man say. "I don't judge. I meet all kinds of people in this business."

Anna didn't come out of her bedroom all day.

Gus had to go to work in the same suit he wore the day before because Anna forgot to do laundry. He burnt his hand trying to make toast, spilled coffee and jelly on his striped-blue tie. Later in the day, showing new property to a young couple, he caught the seat of his pants on a loose nail on the porch of a house, ripped it nearly to the crotch. He had to stop at TJ MAXX and buy a pair a size too small. When he got home, there was no supper and the evening paper had not been delivered. Anna was still in her bedroom. Angry was not the exact word Gus would describe as his feeling for that day.

The next day was slightly better. Anna was out of her room, but not talking. She heard Gus' words, just didn't acknowledge him. She made breakfast, made sure he had a clean suit for work. The next day was a bit better than the day before. She spoke to him, made breakfast, had his

clothes ready for him, but wandered around like she was in a daydream.

By the weekend, Anna surprised Gus by telling him she off to see a friend. Gus was speechless. Only once Anna had stayed gone for more than a day. She went off to see a friend from school who was in the hospital. That was ten years ago.

"Is this someone I know?" Gus asked with a bit of venom in his voice.

"I will not stand by for third degree, brother. You will be fine for two days without me."

Gus breathed through flared nostrils. That's what he did when he was miffed. "I was only asking, sister," Gus said.

"I'm expecting a package." Anna looked in her handbag to make sure she had her train ticket. She didn't even look at Gus. She averted his eyes, speaking calmly, which was what she did when she was miffed. "I'm expecting a package tomorrow. Please don't open it, brother." Then briefly she turned to Gus, fighting back tears. "It means so much to me. This package."

"Anna? Please, tell me if anything is…"

"I don't wish to discuss anything," she said coldly.

Gus nodded. "Of course, sister." He sighed heavily. "Would you like me to take you to the train station?"

"I have a cab coming. I'll wait outside for it." Anna took her purple and white suitcase and exited the townhouse swiftly, slamming the front door behind her.

Gus was shocked. Anna made some noise.

11

Gus heard the mailman drive up in the parking space provided by the real estate office. He was curious what package he was bringing. Anna had never been this mysterious before. As soon as his wingtips hit the porch he heard the mailman scream. Gus saw the mailman run back inside the old rusted mail truck, holding the package close to his chest.

It must have been about ten large, black buzzards surrounding the mail truck. At different intervals they would all spread their wings and make menacing squawking sounds.

"I'm not getting out, Gus, until you get rid of your friends," the mailman called out.

Gus laughed. "They're just birds," he called back. Gus sighed and shook his head.

He walked out to the parking lot and tried to shoo the buzzards away by clapping his hands, screaming at them in a high pitched voice. Only two of them flew away. The rest stood their ground. The biggest buzzard must have been the leader. Quivering violently, the buzzard spread his wings and screeched at Gus.

Gus backed away quickly.

Gus took a few more steps and was on his porch. He hugged the cream colored columns as if it were an invisible force field there to protect him from those nasty psychotic buzzards.

"This is silly!" Gus exclaimed. "They're just birds." He took one step off his porch and all of the buzzards spread their wings and made a battle cry. Gus quickly stepped back up on his porch. He was stunned.

The mailman revved his engine, gave Gus a confused look. Gus threw his arms up in the air.

"I don't know what to do!" Gus bellowed.

"You'll have to come to the post office for this one, Gus!" The mailman screamed and spun out of the parking space with a sour look on his face.

"I don't have time…," he began to explain, but the mailman was already gone. "See what you've done." Gus wagged a fat finger at them. The buzzards relaxed, some even flew up in a nearby tree. But they still kept their eyes on Gus.

Gus turned, went back into his townhouse. A few seconds later, he returned outside sporting a jacket and his homburg. He walked from his townhouse and crossed the street, looking back from time to time. The buzzards didn't move from the parking lot. They did keep a watchful on Gus.

12

Gus arrived at the post office without any molestation of any kind. Even crossing two streets, a few cars stopped to let him ease his way across. Gus laughed, waved to them. He wondered aloud what had got into the drivers in the town. Suddenly they were kind and thought of others.

Inside the post office, Mrs. Cobbler was in front of Gus, as was Jerome Tabor and Leila Stalh. The three of them turned to Gus.

"Good afternoon," Gus said to them.

They exchanged looks and then looked back at Gus.

"Gus, you can cut in front of me," Mrs. Cobbler said, and smiled.

"Me too, Gus. Hop right on in there." Jerome took Gus by the elbow and moved him in front of him.

"Oh, my," Gus giggled. "Thank you, ever so much."

"Well, Gus." Leila motioned with a hand. "Get right up in front. Don't be shy.'

What in the world? Gus thought.

"What can I do for you, Gus?" Sylvia was behind the counter. Sylvia is one of the reasons Gus avoided the post office. She had a terrible whine in her voice topped off with the worst lisp in the history of mankind. Sylvia also used to be the mail carrier when Gus and Karen lived in that small house on Trinidad. Gus has a German Shepard at the time. One afternoon the dog broke free and chased Sylvia three blocks before it grew tired and returned home. Sylvia called animal control. The dog was taken away because Sylvia had lied about being bitten by the German Shepard.

Gus never forgave her and on a weekly cycle, called the main office upstate and complained about Sylvia.

It was strange, however, even Sylvia was nice to him.

"Come on, Gus, you can tell old Sylvia." She was actually smiling, which scared the bejesus out of Gus.

"I'm picking up a package for Anna," Gus said softly.

"Oh, how is dear Anna these days." Sylvia leaned in, resting her elbows and extremely large, sagging breasts on the counter. This act further appalled Gus.

"She's fine. Could I have the package?" Gus flashed a conservative smile. The one he learned to use when asking for a lower price on a house from the owners.

"Oh, of course, Gus. I'll be right back." Sylvia left and in two minutes returned with a poorly wrapped package in brown paper. It was obvious it was a vase or a cylinder of some sort by the shape. Sylvia handed it to Gus carefully. "There you go, Gus. Be careful with it. It says fragile on the front." Sylvia cackled.

Gus scrunched up his nose and wished his hearing had failed him at the moment of Sylvia's laugh. He walked toward the post office exit. Everyone wished him a good day. It was too weird. He scurried out the day quickly.

In the parking lot the large black buzzards swarmed around Gus. At every turn they screeched and raised their wings. He saw a taxi parked a few spaces over.

"Hey!" Gus called out to him.

The taxi driver lowered his newspaper and searched for the voice. "What?" He called back.

"I need a lift home," Gus said, his voice reached a pitch that whined before it broke.

"Well," the taxi driver yelled back. "Come on over here and get in."

"I can't!" Gus leaned against the brick wall of the post office. "I'm being terrorized!"

"What?" The taxi driver laughed. "They ain't

nothing but birds! Kick them out of the way!"

"No, please. Drive up here and get me. These psychopathic buzzards mean to do me harm. I'll tip an extra twenty… please…"

The taxi driver threw his newspaper in the back seat. He started the engine and drove two spaces over. The hood of the taxi broke ring of the buzzards and they flew off in a frenzy. The passenger door opened and Gus jumped in. The taxi sped off.

Gus straightened himself. He wiped beads of sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. He heard the taxi driver laugh. Gus curled his lip in a pout. "Stop laughing. I was in real danger."

"I would if I could, friend," the taxi driver said.

13

"They must have gone away," Gus said, looking around the parking lot of his townhouse. There was a sigh of deep relief. "Thank God."

He put his key in the door and jangled it. The door opened with no problems. He went inside, kicked the door shut. Gus walked into the kitchen, sat the package on the table. Before he unwrapped the brown paper, Gus noticed there wasn't a return address.

"How strange. Who sent this to Anna?" Gus shrugged, pulled the paper from the object. His mouth gaped open at the discovery. "An urn…?" He examined the round ivory pot. The craftsmanship was exquisite. Then he saw the nameplate.

Cyril Danforth.

Gus could feel the anger rise up in him. He clutched the urn with both hands and lift it high above his head. Then he heard the flutter wings behind him. Gus turned and saw five, maybe six large black buzzards in the kitchen. All of them screeching at him, their wings spread out in a threatening way.

Gus dropped the urn. It shattered at his feet. A pile of ashes had spread on the linoleum kitchen floor.

One by one the buzzards took flight. In a dizzying swirl, the buzzards pecked and scratched Gus's face, taking flesh from bone. Gus tried to fight them, but they were quick and even trying to protect himself with his hands, only caused the buzzards to be more aggressive. A flurry of black feathers had blinded him so that he ran into the kitchen table and fell on his back.

Before long, Gus was robbed of all of the flesh from

his face. Nothing was left but a skull resting on a limp body. One by one, the buzzards took a pinch of Cyril's ashes and placed them on Gus's naked skull. Soon, Gus's flesh was replaced with Cyril's.

The front door opened and closed. The sound of Anna's heels could be heard. She came into the kitchen and was met with a pleasant surprise. Cyril was now standing, straightening out the suit that formally belonged to Gus. He tugged at the drooping skin under the neck that also formally belonged to Gus.

"Cyril!" Anna ran to him and threw her arms around him.

"See," Cyril said. "I told you the spell would work! Aunt Doris was a terrible witch, but great at cataloguing spells."

"Oh, Cyril. I'm so happy." Anna wrapped her arms around him, kissed him full on the lips. They laughed, kissed again. "Now we can start our lives."

"Of course, darling…"

Cyril and Anna stopped talking. They heard a strange noise. It almost sounded like pecking inside the walls. A small hole appeared on kitchen wall right over the stove. Cyril moved toward it.

"Don't." Anna took hold of Cyril's arm.

He took offense at first. Then he smiled, gently removed Anna's python grip from his elbow. "Don't be silly, darling." Cyril chortled. "I'm sure it's nothing."

The walls began to crumble. Anna screamed. Cyril clutched Anna close to him to shield the many feathers that hovered around both of them.

14

The car swerved across the double lines to the other side and then back to the side. Driving is not Jeanie's best talent. Nor is singing. Accompanying Jeanie to the bars to do karaoke is on par with her driving. Embarrassing and dangerous. Going too fast and never paying attention to any detail, especially what side of the road the car is supposed to be on; was the same thing and Jeanie never pays attention to the lyrics or the melody or the fact that it's a ballad in comparison to a fast hard rock song.

She was in the middle of giving me some background on Hamilton Cross and Jeanie was talking just as fast as she was driving. All I could do was pray no one was coming across the other side and nod at her as I gripped the dashboard for dear life.

"Well… from what I could dig up," she said, her eyes growing bigger and bigger. "Hamilton Cross came from a poor family. Hamilton and Cross are made up names. His real name is Daniel Hill. When he got out of high school, he moved to North Carolina and changed his name. For almost a year, he bluffed his way through Duke University, until he was found out by a fellow student. But, it was there he met Bobby Gorman."

A car came hurling down the opposite side and Jeanie moved her car back into her lane just in time. Inside my head I was panicking. Outside, I was bracing a smile, straining my features.

Jeanie continued. "Bobby Gorman led Hill or should I say Cross? Anyways, Gorman led Cross into a life of petty crime and both were sentenced four years in state prison for stealing Police equipment out of a local police department in

California. They hadn't seen each other in years apparently until Gorman showed up at Cross' job at Furniture store in New York. They embarked on a string of Grocery store robberies. Gorman was not arrested until Cross ratted him out. For that, Cross only served two years. Gorman served five but turned state's evidence selling out a narcotics outfit in Houston. His sentence was commuted. Gorman disappeared and brings us to up to speed," she said with a laugh.

The car came to a sudden stop, jerking me forward. A large group of about twenty or so gypsies had gathered in the middle of the road. One of them was waving his arms to stop us. He was a big man that wore orange silk shirt and a purple trousers too small for him. He had a nose ring in his left nostril and two hoop earrings that hung down to his chin. He ambled up to the car and Jeanie rolled her window a quarter of the way down.

"What's wrong?" Jeanie asked him.

"An accident," the gypsy said, trying to keep his emotions intact. "Our bus swerved on the wet road and the bus struck a tree. Several of my brethren and sisters are hurt badly."

"Did anyone call 911?" I asked.

"No… no one has a phone… my… my daughter wandered off while I was helping those in need. She fell in the lake… I fear she has drowned!"

Jeanie turned the engine off. We got out of the car and made our way through the crowd of loudly dressed gypsies, the father of the little girl following closely behind us. Jeanie dialled 911. The operator spoke loudly, but precise, in a harsh New York accent that made Jeanie squint with every syllable. Injured people lay on the side of the road, bleeding in the care of either friends or family.

The bus was as the man said it was: the front end

smashed in and lying on its side. The tree, a huge oak split in half, was across the road ahead of us. To the left of the tree, down the hill, was the lake the little girl had possibly fell in.

"Tanja!" The man called out. "Tanja!"

"Please." I touched his arm. "That will not help if you're certain she fell in the lake."

"I know this man," Jeanie whispered. "His name is Gunari Boldo. He works for the king of gypsies."

I knew who she meant. I thought I'd seen this man at Conny Barabbas's side, as they marched down Main Street in Augustus, along with an entourage. Probably scoping out what stores to steal from, or strong-arm businesses into paying Besnik not to destroy their shops.

"I'm quite certain that is what happened," Boldo said as he began to sob.

I patted his arm and he fell into me, burying his head into my breasts, leaving my blouse soaking wet from his tears. I noticed he smelled like a spice, but I couldn't think of the name. A lemony-wood fragrance to it. I gave Jeanie a look. She collected the man, said some comforting words, and quietly led him away.

I reached into my memory to find a spell that might help find the little girl. He spoke her name, so maybe I can mumble a few words, conjure her name as the wind carried it off in an echo. I spoke her name in a whisper immediately after I cast the spell. "Tanja," I whispered.

A constant, burling wind formed, carrying my voice through the trees. I closed my eyes and blocked out the ambulance and fire engines coming down the street blaring their sirens. Deputy Fugg brought up the rear, swerving in the road as if he wanted to pass them. I heard a faint voice, almost like static from a dying radio signal. The wind picked up. The trees bent backwards and the voice became stronger.

"Tanja…" The gypsy's broken English mixed with

deep southern dialect was apparent. The wind swirled around again, dropping leaves from limbs and bringing dark clouds to previously blue sky. "Tanja!" The voice repeated.

I found myself following the voice. I walked a few paces left toward the lake. But the voice was leading me past it and to a wooded path covered in leaves.

"Hey!" I heard Deputy Fugg call out. "Hey! Where you going! You can't leave! You're a witness…"

Jeanie touched his shoulder. He turned quickly, placed his hand on his gun. "Evelina is looking for this man's missing girl." Jeanie's voice faded out, as did Fugg's. I was deep into the woods now. Nothing but birds, the wind, and the gypsy's voice calling for his daughter mattered now.

Behind a tree, I saw the arm of a man holding down a little dark haired girl. He was pushing her face into a pile of leaves and I could see his other hand trying to remove her clothing. At first, I panicked. There was a sharp inhale of breath. Then I got it together. No time left to stutter or make haste.

I whispered a spell that normally would have fallen on deaf ears.

I heard Raja growl. For a split second, he'd become visible, but only so Tanja's attacker could see him. Raja bared his fangs, his ears were back, and his stance was ready for attack. The man let Tanja go. He whimpered, took a few steps back. I could see the dark, curly- haired man now. He was bearded, and wore a yellow hoodie stained with dirt. His jogging pants was torn and barely fit his hipless body. When he took off in a sprint, his pants fell to his ankles, revealing an unwashed ass.

Raja chased after him, his barking echoed throughout the woods, alerting all officials and Boldo, Tanja's father. Raja leaped on the man, knocking him on the ground, driving his face into a tree stump. The man called

for help. But Raja was not going to let him up. He kept his snout close to the man's neck, letting him know that one false move and Raja would tear his throat out.

Fugg and several ambulance and firefighters surrounded the man. One firefighter had to hold Boldo back. He spat on her attacker, cursed him in a gypsy language I'd never heard of.

"Get the dog off me!" Tanja's attacker cried out.

Fugg looked at the man incredulously. "What the hell is he talking about?"

A firefighter shrugged. "I don't know," he said to Fugg. "I don't see a dog anywhere."

I whispered another spell and Raja was back at my shop.

***

Of course Olga lived in a huge house with twelve gables and a driveway that was three miles long. She had several servants working as if they worked in a hotel or a resort. There was two guards on duty, one at the gate as turn into the driveway and one as you park near the house. They kept in contact with each other, barking out, "they just entered the house", or "roger that". After the second security guard checked our bags for weapons or illegal contraband, Jeanie and I were granted access to the foyer of the house and greeted by Olga's secretary, Mary Wynn.

"Hello. You are…?" She gave us the most plastic smile on a weathered middle-age face and the limpest handshake I have ever experienced.

"Jeanie Stanford, Sundial Post."

"Marvellous!" Mary exerted passionately, but moved with little flexibility in her body. "And you…?"

"Evelina, I work at Domino's making pizza," I said.

But I'm a part time Head-hunter for the Khali tribe of Westford."

"I'm… sorry…" Mary was confused and obviously didn't know a joke when she heard it. "You make pizzas?"

"She's joking." Jeanie giggled and gave me an evil eye. "She's my personal assistant. So much to do, nowadays, you need one just to get through the week!"

Mary and Jeanie cackled like hyenas at that. I rolled my eyes.

"That's just wonderful! Let me show you two to the library and you can start the interview with Mrs. Daniels in a few."

Mary had an odd limp when she walked, but the bum leg did not hamper her speed, she was a ways ahead of us going down a long corridor that led to the library. Most houses had the rich owned had studies or libraries on top floors. Olga Daniels had hers in a cellar. Go figure.

"Behave yourself, Evelina," Jeanie whispered. "If I am pretending to interview this woman, let me do all the talking."

"You don't know what I need to know, Jeanie," I said.

"You'll have to cobble pieces from her answers to my questions. Trust me. You do not want this woman as enemy. Could be detrimental to what your goals are."

"Ugggh! Stop quoting our fucking teachers from school!"

"That was sound advice and you know it!" Jeanie had a heaviness to her voice. She was in mother - mode.

"Okay, okay." I threw my hands up. "Very good advice, Mother!"

"I said, behave…"

Just as Jeanie said that, we were at library's door and Olga and Mary had a funny look on their faces.

Jeanie threw her head back and cackled. "Just a little game we play…" she tried to collect herself and save face simultaneously, only… it came off as a very strange face as if she'd eaten seeds from a watermelon.

Olga raised an eyebrow, pursed her lips. "I don't have that sort of relationship with my help. Good or bad. Mary usually handles those sort of people."

Ouch! Those sort of people. I'm not making it up. She said that word for word. I tell you this: her "library" was nicer than the suite in Piedmont hotel in the main part of town. She sat us on a love couch straight across from her in her antique velvet chair. Obviously it was made in the 1800's. That design is not sold at Higgin's furniture store. The back was an odd spider web in

"I've seen you before," she said quickly.

"Oh?" I must have had the look of a deer caught in the headlights of a car before it hits it. I thought the jig was up and this charade of working as Jeanie's P.A. was actually eating away at me. "Where was that?"

"You live in Weird town with all the other odd balls." Olga said.

"Ah." I laughed and shook my head. "No." I accentuated the no so the bitch could tell I had attitude. "You mean Weretown. Pronounced Were-ton, not weird town. And I live over by Augustus University. Just outside of Weretown."

"Beside the point." Olga forced the statement through clenched, perfectly white teeth that could have chewed through brick and mortar. "I know who you are. You're that silly witch Hamilton hired."

"Look, I'm just here to interview you…" Jeanie tried to explain. Olga wasn't having it.

"Drop the con, darling." She managed a smile. A scary smile to boot. "You got in. That's all that matters. My

security would have turned you away if you said you were a witch helping Hamilton. They aren't too crazy about him. They were very loyal to Winston. Plus… I was expecting you two."

"You were expecting us?" Jeanie scoffed.

"How is it you were expecting us…?" I tried to get a word in, but it was obvious Olga liked the sound of her own voice.

"You cast a spell that rid us of Winston. He fell over from a heart attack on the train," Olga said without any emotion.

"Wait… That was not on purpose. My spell was just to put Winston asleep and Hamilton get back what was his…"

"Well that's not what happened. Hamilton said he lit candles and they burned a horrible Herb smell…"

"Herbs? What kind of Herb smell?"

"Oh I don't know. Thyme I think he said." Olga sighed, already bored with the conversation. She started to look over her red fingernails, making sure they were not chipped or faded.

"Thyme or Herbs of any kind had nothing to do with the spell I sold him." I said. I glanced at Jeanie and she was giving me an angry glare. I had to change the subject. I couldn't stand that stare boring a hole in me any longer. "Well, Hamilton has also hired me to find out who is blackmailing him."

"Of course." was all that Olga said, followed by a heavy sigh. "He's going to have to pay with his allowance."

"Maybe money is not what the person or persons want," I said. "They want the bones of Bobby Gorman."

"God." Olga laughed, placed a hand on her more than ample bosoms. "I don't know who that is and Hamilton is not a grave robber! They are wasting their time," Olga

continued. "Hamilton doesn't have anything else to offer. Hell, two years ago he didn't even have a job. I got him the job with Winston's firm."

"He willingly gave your boyfriend a job?" Jeanie asked.

Olga was surprised by the question. "Of course! Why wouldn't he? Look… Winston always had girlfriends. I've known about all of Winston's lovers. We played this silly game that each time we stray outside our marriage we pretend the lovers are a one off fling and we have our time for a bit… then we go back to who we really are. This last one was that wretched little secretary Kim Buckley. Even her name makes me sick to my stomach. Really, I don't know what Winston saw in her. In my circle of friends, there was plenty to choose from. Wealthy, beautiful… clean."

"Clean?" I asked. "As if she didn't bathe?"

"No, I'm sure she bathed. Just not in clean water. These little tramps Winston ran with lived in squalor. Apartment housing, floors caked with dirt. My God. I never thought the day America would turn into a third world country."

"You were not born with all of this" Jeanie pointed to the room filled antiques and books older than all of us in the room. She was more than a little ticked off at Olga's attitude toward commoners. I wasn't mad at her. I had a sixth sense that Olga would turn out beyond snobbish and delve into the 'Final solution' for all the poor people of the world.

"Yes. I was bred from good stock," was Olga's answer. Again, no surprise there.

"What about Hamilton?" I threw the question at her like a fastball from a pitcher.

"He's been redeemed several times," Olga said.

"Redeemed?" I chuckled. "And from what has he been redeemed from?"

"Hamilton was born into a good family whose Mother threw it all away for no good con artist. Tore the family apart. They lost everything. All this happened while Hamilton was at Augustus."

"He went to school here?" Jeanie calculated Olga's statement, finding the results fraudulent either from Hamilton or her source.

"That's what he told me," Olga said.

She was getting tired of the cross examination. So I had to steer the conversation back to her helping us, instead of us investigating her.

"I have to ask this," I said. "As well as the next question. Already you've been a huge help, Mrs. Daniels." Olga flashed those frighteningly white, straight teeth at me. "Where did you meet Hamilton?"

"How's that helping with the blackmail?" Mary asked. First time since the conversation began that she said anything. That question stirred some unusual feelings from her.

"No, no." Olga used a hand gesture to back Mary down. "Its fine, Mary. I met Hamilton online. We then met up at the Sharif. He bought me a drink. I bought him dinner and to my room we went. I often go to the Sharif to find company for the night when I am near Atlanta. But I haven't been there in two years."

"Not since you've been with Hamilton Cross?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"He seems very uptight about being Bisexual…"

"He's not Bi," Olga cut me off. "He just dabbles a bit on occasion. He's all man, I'll tell you!" She giggled like a schoolgirl telling a secret.

Jeanie and I glanced at each other. Her expression was a question of 'Well, Evelina. Is he?' I looked away,

scratched my eyebrow. I went back to questioning Olga.

"Do you know anyone who would want to blackmail Hamilton?" I asked.

"No," she said matter-of-factly. "Frankly, everyone I know has more money than they know what to do with."

"I'm a little confused," Jeanie said. "If you know of the blackmail, then it's not blackmail anymore. You have knowledge of the situation. Blackmailers do not have a leg to stand on."

"I'm not the one they have to worry about. Doesn't bother me that Hamilton has been with a man, even if it was Winston."

"Okay." I was stunned by that statement for two reasons: One, Winston has done that before with other men. Two, this marriage is insane. "Who does Hamilton know that cares about this…incident?"

I almost laughed, but I didn't. I held it in this time.

"His Mother. Jill Fulbright."

"The Television minister?" Jeanie and I said in synchronicity.

"Yes. Her," Olga said, agitated that we were still on the subject of Hamilton Cross and not Olga Daniels.

Jeanie and I exchanged amused looks. Jeanie had been extremely critical of Rev. Fulbright in her articles for the paper. She, like many of her fellow journalists, sought out an interview and was denied like everyone else in the media. She runs her ministry like a dictatorship. Her extended family, many members of the Church, live in a compound. Very controversial in her views, especially on Transgender roles and gay rights. So, no wonder Hamilton was upset that she might find out. But… why lie and say it would be Olga?

"He doesn't get any money from Rev. Fulbright, correct?"

"Not to my knowledge," Olga said. "But… if she

ever…" Her eyes lifted skyward, indicating death and the chance to fly to heaven illustrated in Rev. Fulbright's sermons. "Then he would inherit the fortune she's built in the last ten years."

"I see. For now, Hamilton lives here." I waved my hand.

"He has a small apartment the company owns, just outside of Augustus University." Olga then leaned in, uncrossed her legs and re - crossed them. "I like to keep him close by, though."

For some reason Olga's dark brown eyes were burning a hole through me when she said that. No way could she have known that Cross and I slept together. Could she? I wouldn't think he'd tell her… just very odd people. Jealousy is a complicated emotion. I know it all too well. What puzzled me is she's jealous of me and not of Cross being with her husband… then it hit me like a ton bricks.

Hamilton Cross was Winston and Olga's lover.

"Well, I think we should go." I leaped from my chair quickly.

"Oh." Olga was surprised that we were leaving so soon. "Alright… You just got here…"

"You were a lot of help, Mrs. Daniels."

"I can't see how," she shrugged. "Mary will show you both out."

Mary received a phone call on her cell just as we were walking down the hallway. I looked over her shoulder and recognized the number.

999-698-6050.

"Please… son," she whispered. "I'll try to find you in an hour…" Our eyes met and she turned her back to me. "People are here right now… I can't talk… Who are you going to be…? Ok. I'll find you." She hung up, turned back to me. "Kids." She flashed an uncomfortable smile. "What

are you going to do with them?"

"Yeah." I smiled back.

"Do you have children?" She asked me. There was an odd seriousness to the tone of her voice.

"No." I shook my head.

"I'd do anything for my son, Ms. Giles," Mary Dancer said.

I nodded and excused myself. I trotted behind Jeanie, caught up with her quickly.

"It's Mary," I whispered.

"What is Mary?" She whispered back.

"Mary and her son are the blackmailing Hamilton Cross," I whispered just before a security man ushered us out the door.

15

Jeanie and I saw Rev. Jill Fulbright that afternoon.

She was holding a revival in the auditorium of Augustus University. We had to meet in the head football coach's office. So passing through a locker room that had the same smell as a stable of horses did fit well with Jeanie. Some women get aroused by the smell of sweaty men. Jeanie gets sick to her stomach. But there was another odd smell in there. A strong odor Thyme.

Rev. Fulbright had the usual bodyguards. Big, silent, and brainless. But her number two man was different. He was tall, bearded, and very effeminate. He was dressed in all white, wore a monocle and white beret. He introduced himself as Simon Abaddon.

"Well… we have two very pretty girls here," Simon said. "Are you two students here at Augustus by chance?"

"We used to be," Jeanie answered almost immediately.

I jabbed her in the ribs and she screamed. She gave me a look and I gave it right back. I didn't have a good feeling about this man. Right away I felt something in my bones. I didn't want to give him any of my cards. I wanted him to give up all of his ticks and turns in this game.

"We don't talk to flunkies," I said.

Jeanie gasped. "What the hell, Evelina?"

Simon laughed. "I'm no one's flunky, darling," he said with even coolness tinged with threat.

"We're here to see Ms. Fulbright, not her press secretary, not her bodyguards and damn for sure not her flunky." I gave it right back to him. I bet he wasn't expecting a woman to be antagonistic. Seemed to throw him for loop.

I know it pissed him off to no end being spoken to without any respect. He batted his eyes, sighed heavily like the little bitch he was.

"Chill out, Evelina-God-what is wrong with you!"

"Little missy…" Simon said trying to stay calm. "You have no idea who you are fucking with…"

"That's enough, Simon!" A female voice called out from the office. Obviously it was Reverend Fulbright. Simon snapped back into his role as an assistant when he heard her. Simon was all smiles, back to being the gentle flower, leaving behind the three-headed mega bitch, momentarily though. "Show them in now Simon."

Simon stroked his salt and pepper beard and licked his top lip. "Right this way." He showed us through the door of the Coach's office with the fluid motion of a hand slowly waving. Jeanie went in first, I followed, pushing past the tall man and the other two bodyguards.

One of the bodyguards shadowed us. He made sure Jeanie and I sat in two plastic chairs opposite a tall, very beautiful woman in her early sixties. After he helped us in our seat, the body guard stood behind Reverend Fulbright. She had died her shoulder-length hair auburn but left one strand grey. It was very effective. I could see where Hamilton got his good looks. She was in an elegant blue dress with glitter on the nylon mesh covering her breasts. There was a huge amethyst ring the size of a soft ball on her left hand. Whenever Reverend Fulbright would move her hand an inch to the right, the setting sun would catch in the stone and cast a cylinder of a shadow.

No one spoke for the longest time. We all sat there eyeing each other. Jeanie started to speak several times, stopped, looked at me, then Reverend Fulbright, and she would make a noise in the back of her throat in exasperation. I had to say something. The silence was getting on my

nerves. When I started to speak, Reverend Fulbright cut me off.

"This is about Danny, isn't it?"

"Danny?" I asked.

"Daniel Hill is Hamilton's real name." Jeanie reminded me.

"Oh yeah," I said, nodded. "Yes…partially. It is about Hamilton-I mean, Danny."

"You said that sarcastically," Reverend Fulbright said.

"Why do you think that?" I snickered, caught myself midway and coughed, then straightened in my uncomfortable chair, readjusting the flaps on my skirt.

"It is not a crime for a person to change their name, Miss Giles."

"I didn't say it was."

"Not like being a witch used to be," she said. "They don't hang, or burn people for their practices or beliefs… no matter… how unsavory those practices… or… beliefs are… things have changed, you've noticed."

"I thought this was about Hamilton… or… is it Danny?" I shot back.

"It is. This conversation is, Miss Giles. I wanted all judgement on the table… out in front…"

"You've made your point," I told her.

"Changing a name can be helpful. I have done so twice. You shed the skin of the old you and find the skin of the new you. When I was thirteen I was married to a beast of a man who liked to use his hands to settle an argument."

"You were lucky you got out of there. Most women don't," I said.

"Every time I come back to Weirdtown… or Augustus… I watch to make sure he doesn't remember me. Now that I am on television he's recognized me."

"You're from here?" Jeanie asked. She felt my eyes on her and we exchanged glances.

"No. I am from Hollowpoint, Virginia," Reverend Fulbright said. She pointed over her shoulder and continued. "That's about two miles from Augustus. No university to keep the town economy going. As a matter of fact, Hollowpoint doesn't exist anymore. Not even on any maps. The town is forgotten."

Hollowpoint? There's no such place. She's lying. I know the geography of this area. Five miles from here is a mountainside.

"What kept the economy of Hollowpoint going, Reverend Fulbright?" Jeanie threw another question at her. I thought they were wasted questions. I tried to give her a look to stop, but Jeanie didn't pay me any mind.

"Coal mine. Before they closed down. No hotels, no restaurants, no grocery stores… nothing was there. You had to drive or walk… ten miles to Jubila. They have all the industry," Reverend Fulbright chuckled. "Now the river is polluted so much so, human contact would result in flesh dissolving in a mush."

What the hell? She was talking nonsense. Jubila is not ten miles. It's over two hundred and fifty miles and it's in fucking West Virginia!

"What happened to the town? Why did it disappear?"

"Flood," Reverend Fulbright said. "Destroyed the whole town. My family was one of the few who got out before the flood. My Uncle had prior knowledge it would happen."

"E.S.P., I bet," I said sarcastically.

'Of course not," Fulbright said. "You know that doesn't exist."

I was getting sick of the conversation. We were there

to talk about her son… wait. Somehow we've been turned around. We were thrown a bone. I looked at Reverend Fulbright's eyes. They were glassy and the grey. I realized she was under a spell.

"We have to go," I said, stood immediately. I grabbed Jeanie by her sweater and pulled her of her chair.

"What the hell…!? Evelina, stop!" She screamed, her voice was had become strained because of the violence on her vocal chords and she was trying to curse me out, only the words came out in soft whispers.

Something odd happened.

Reverend Fulbright stopped speaking, her mouth was left open, and her bodyguards stopped fidgeting about. It was as if someone hit pause on the DVD player. Jeanie noticed too, and she started to speak. I shook my head and she stopped wagging her tongue. I smacked Jeanie on the arm and pointed to the door.

We hurried out of the football coach's office. Simon was gone. He'd placed the spell on Reverend Fulbright?

I turned back and marched inside the coach's office. Fulbright and her bodyguards were startled by my presence.

"Who the devil are you?" Reverend Fulbright said.

Her bodyguards rushed toward me. They took an arm each and I struggled some before realizing it was futile to do so. These men could not only break me in half, but grind my bones into dust.

"Your personal assistant said I could speak with you," I said.

"Personal assistant?" Fulbright ruffled her eyebrows. "My personal assistant is in New York dealing with a family loss. She is not here."

"She? Not a tall bearded man dressed in white?"

"You're talking nonsense, miss," she then said to her bodyguards. "I have a lot of work to do, see the young

woman out."

They carried me out the office and halfway through the smelly locker room when I persuaded them to turn me loose and I could walk the rest of the way. They dropped me like I was hot and Jeanie came to my rescue, screaming insults at the brutes.

"That man was not Reverend Fulbright's P.A," I told Jeanie. "And while we were interviewing her, she and her bodyguards were under a spell."

"That tall man did it," Jeanie said.

"Yeah. I think he did. He was trying to throw us off by having her feed us nonsense."

"I don't know, Evelina." Jeanie shook her head. "Something she said sounds familiar."

"Jeanie, come on!" I scoffed. "There is no such town called Hollowpoint around here. We would know. We've lived here all our lives."

"I'm still going to research it," Jeanie informed me and we made our way to the parking lot.

"Okay." I threw my hands up. "I still say you're wasting your time."

"Just get in the fucking car so we can get some supper!"

16

Mungo hated being on the streets. Especially the lower East side of Augustus. Possibly the largest population of homeless in the whole state, and the roughest part of the city. With Sherriff Lewis and one deputy named Carlisle, nearly impossible to keep the crime level down, which the statistics shows is unusual for an area like Augustus, or the locals call Weretown. Most authority chock up the crime in the area that is mostly break-ins and petty robbery, as college students who are bored.

Mungo knew different. Augustus/Weretown is run by the local crime family. The head of that family is an old gypsy named Conny Barabbas. Conny was not just superstitious, but believed in giving out curses to block any curse bestowed upon him. He had a pair of twin cousins, Noni and Hammer, who believed in eye for an eye. They also believed in a limb for limb, and a life for death. They lived in a he farm three or four miles outside of Augustus. Several caravans and trailers sat in front of Conny's house. They were family and extended family who did the traveling for him and took care of any jobs he dealt out.

Mungo had a theory about the spells stolen from the shop. One of Conny's underlings broke in, couldn't find any money, and took the spells instead. Also, Mungo thought he recognized the man from riding with the gypsies.

Mungo saw Hopper digging into a dumpster outside of Aesop's coffee house. Hopper used to be a banker. He lost everything in an arson case that was never solved. Help was offered because of his kindness to Mungo when Mungo was younger. A fight between Mungo and a man at a bar years ago left Mungo bleeding on sidewalks. Hopper took

Mungo to the hospital, visited him every day and even offered a job after he was released. At the time Mungo was my father's assistant, so he had to turn it down. They remained friends to this day. Hopper said the life he led had been a lie and the arson revealed the lie. He wanted that lie to stay in that world, while he pursued the truth on the streets.

"Mungo, my friend!" Hopper called out, traffic on a busy side street overpowered his voice. Mungo avoided being hit by a van and crossed the street in a laborious walk. Hopper extended a hand and Mungo grasped it, held it for several seconds.

"Good to see you," Mungo muttered.

"Been too long, old friend." Hopper bellowed and howled in laughter. "Look at this!" He showed Mungo a whole loaf of Salami still wrapped in plastic, never broken into. "We'll go to my place and I'll share this and a bottle of Maude! How's that, my boy?"

Mungo made a noise that came from the back of his throat and nodded. Hopper smacked Mungo on the back and off they went toward an abandoned office building with all of its windows knocked out. Rain had seeped inside and large puddles had formed in several rooms, except Hopper's.

He'd taken four large desks and turned them every which way to create a makeshift house. He'd taken a door and plugged up the ole where the rain was coming in from a hole in the wall across from his house. The living quarters was tight for a man Mungo's size, but just right for Hopper, who only stood five-two in his shoes. Mungo scrunched down and could feel the pain surge in his lower back. But soon, that pain would disappear because the so-called Maude Hopper was sharing with him.

Mungo slurred his words when he asked if he'd seen a young man that fit the description of the one who robbed

us. Hopper thought about it, his bushy eyebrows moved up and down as if he were deciphering a mathematical problem.

"I believe I have," he stated with a long sigh behind it. "He dresses like a Hari-Krishna, correct?"

Mungo shrugged. "I don't know what that is."

"He wears his long hair up in a ponytail—like so…" Hopper demonstrated make believe hair being fashioned in a ponytail, his hand stood over top of his head. "Like this, Mungo? Baggy clothing? Almost a wrap around his body…"

"Yes," Mungo interrupted.

"Ah." Hopper nodded. "I have seen him, old friend. As a matter of fact, I can show you where he frequents. He isn't allowed here." Hopper chuckled. "He and Dancer are not on, shall we say…." Hopper chuckled again and waved his hand. "Not on good terms. He was caught going through Dancer's bags. Over there." Hopper pointed a crooked finger to the office straight ahead. "Dancer has his living quarters. Not sure why this fellow was looking for. Joe Dancer is a very dangerous person. Or should I say dangerous persons."

Joe Dancer was a man afflicted by multiple personalities. Depending upon what day of the month, you could find Joe, who used to be a top chef at the Tres' Village on thirty-third, or Dancer, the enforcer for the fictitious mobster Herman Mann. You could also have a run in with Betty the nurse, Peabody the school teacher and Helmut the airline pilot, or Chester, an eleven year old boy who invents things like light bulbs and doorknobs.

Apparently, our thief had a run in with the real Joe Dancer, who makes an appearance when he's really upset. The real Joe Dancer had been a thief, a blackmailer and a Capo in the Quinn family Mafioso. The story goes, Joe was offered to go into hiding if he testified. He'd found new love with a new bride. Joe accepted the FBI's offer. But before

anything could happen, his new bride was murdered, and Joe was thought to have caught several bullets in the head. He survived with brain trauma and has lived on the streets ever since.

"From what Joe has told me, the thief took a ring from him. A blood diamond the size of a silver dollar." Hopper laughed, slapped his knee as he finished off the pungent Maude.

"I'm surprised you two get along," Mungo said.

"Well." Hopper chuckled once more. "I play a little game with him."

Mungo gave Hopper a disturbed glance.

"Oh! No, no, my boy. Nothing like that!" Hopper was slightly offended by the implication. "I pretend to be his analyst. If I wasn't so jaded…" Hopper shook his head. "This living on the streets and listening to Dancer talk of when he was an infant and his father killing him with a rifle… I would be in an asylum. Just to let you know." Hopper swallowed hard. "I've seen lots of ugly on this street, my boy. Lots of… ugly."

"Do you know where Dancer is?"

Hopper looked at Mungo incredulously. "Are you sure you want to talk to Joe Dancer?"

"I have to find the thief. He stole spells from us," Mungo said. "Some of which are very dangerous."

"Alright." Hopper rose from a sitting position, all of his bones and joints crackling like jiffy popcorn roasting on a stovetop burner. "I'll take you see Dancer. Today is Tuesday. He's an insurance salesman on Hyland Park."

"Will he remember the thief?"

"Ohhhh, Mungo, my friend." Hopper laughed and raised his hand in the air as if to tell Mungo not to worry. "Trust me. No matter who Joe Dancer thinks he is, he mentions that incident!"

There was some rumbling going on in the next office. Joe Dancer's area. Mungo and Hopper exchanged looks of concern. Hopper placed a finger over his lips, and a wry grin crossed his face. With that same finger, he pointed to the other office. Mungo made sure his footsteps were not as heavy as usual. He led the way through partial darkness to the sunlit office. From the open door, he and Hopper could see a tall thin man, dressed in a dirty white wrap. His head was shaven except one long ponytail that stood on top of his misshapen head.

It was the thief who'd stolen the spells.

Mungo crept up to the door just as the thief looked up. The man gasped. He didn't run right away. He acted as if he didn't know what to do next. He had an old greasy duffle bag open, rifling through it like a he'd lost something, tossing clothing over his head and notebooks and graded papers to the floor. He glared at Hopper and Mungo. Hopper had a devil may care smile on his face.

"Here," Hopper called out to the man. "I don't think Dancer would like you stealing from him again!"

The thief took off in a sprint toward a hole in the wall. Mungo ran after him. He was surprisingly quick for a man his size. He caught the man by his feet and pulled him out of the hole. As if the thief had expected to be caught, he turned to Mungo and threw dust in his face.

Mungo withdrew from the thief, stumbled backwards and coughed. He became short of breath and fell on his back, wheezing. The thief shimmied through the hole in the wall and disappeared. Hopper went to Mungo's aide, but had no idea how to help. Mungo shook violently. Still wheezing and coughing, he barely managed two words.

"Get… Evelina…"

17

When Jeanie and I arrived at the shop, a shrivelled old man was standing in the doorway. His torn and tattered overcoat had multiple stains and the holes were getting bigger each day he wore the clothing. He was wearing mismatched loafers and no socks. When he turned to face us, I recognized him right away. I jumped out of the car just as Jeanie put it in park.

"Hopper!" I screeched, ran to him. "I didn't even know you were still alive!"

He laughed uproariously. "Barely, baby-doll. How are you?"

He always called me baby-doll. He said I reminded him of his younger sister and that was the family nickname for her. I hadn't seen Hopper since my father's funeral. He disappeared, became a man of the streets. Of course, I never searched for him, nor gave it a thought.

"I haven't seen you since dad's funeral." I took him by the arm after we hugged. He smelled like a barrel old fish, still, I felt a great love for this over-educated, under achieving banker.

"Yes, and I'm sorry for lost time," Hopper said. He had a worried look on his face, tears in his eyes. "But…." He paused to find the right words. "Mungo needs your help, baby-doll. I'm chancing his life jus to run down here and get you…"

We rushed to the abandoned office in Jeanie's car. She wasn't happy carting around a homeless man nor a man whom she'd always hated being around. Jeanie was uncomfortable being around Hopper ever since she walked in on Hopper and an old school teacher of ours, Mrs. Tunt,

who taught algebra in the ninth grade. Hopper used to come in at three twenty to pick us up. That day, Jeanie had to run to the principal's office to get me. I was there for doing something naughty. Not sure what I'd done. Jeanie retrieved me and she was the first one to open the door to the classroom.

To this day, Jeanie mentions the horror she saw. All I can do is laugh. She takes things so serious.

We drove out to the abandoned office building and found Mungo exactly where Hopper had left him. He was lying there trying to catch his breath, his face covered in blue powder. I knew the spell the thief had thrown on Mungo. I'd seen a gypsy use it on a police officer a few years ago. I offered my help to the police and was denied. That police officer died three days later.

I told them we had to drag Mungo to the car. Jeanie tried to argue as usual. She wanted to call an ambulance. No way in hell Mungo would go for that. No authorities could be involved with Mungo. He watched his father burned to death in the 1950's by an angry mob because they said he was a witch. He watched the police stand on the curb of Main Street and watch his father burn at a stake.

Nope. No authorities could be involved unless it was over Mungo's dead body.

We took Mungo back to the shop. We laid him out on his bed and I began the healing spell. Jeanie helped me prepare the potion before she dashed off. She had to go spend some time with Albert.

I made the potion. Two tea spoons of organic honey in boiled water, on high for ten minutes. Has to be exactly ten minutes, no more, no less. Half of a ginger root sliced into threes. Exactly three, the length of a forefinger. Sauté ginger root with the boiled honey water. Remove the ginger root and wrap them in three separate corn husks that have

been sitting in a jar of dust.

And yes, to answer your question, I have jars of corn husks filled with dust just for these occasions. You never know when you'll need them.

Leave to sit on the counter for twenty minutes. Each day, pour the honey water over Mungo's shirtless chest. Take a corn husk wrap and lay over his left eye. Slice the ginger the wrap came from into three wedges, perfectly squared and feed it to Mungo.

The first day, I took care of Mungo. Watched over him and said a small prayer in Lebanese, which is where the spell originated. But I had a hunch where the thief had gotten the spell from.

Years ago, I had seen a street dancer perform for a crowd of hundreds on Main Street here in Weretown. She was beautiful, graceful. Wore a bright orange bandana in her long black hair and a purple silk dress. The music was a mixture of flamenco guitar, and a hurdy-gurdy rapturously blending with hillbilly Dobro and banjo. A caravan was parked on Side Street near a camera shop and a deli. People whooped and called out to her. A band of drunken men grew very rowdy as she danced closer to them. One even placed his hand under her dress. This gypsy girl took a violent dislike to the act. She spat on him and yelled a curse her native tongue. Just as he grabbed her again, she turned and blew blue dust in his face.

His breathing was still laborious. He was in and out of consciousness, witnessing to someone about life incidents that I, nor Hopper, was privy to. Something Hopper and I had both seen our parents do on their deathbeds. I couldn't help worrying one of closest friends would die. I broke down in Hopper's arms. Hopper stayed all night at Mungo's bedside, while I cried myself to sleep and wrestle with horrible dreams of life incidents from the past.

***

The next day, Jeanie came to check on things. She brought Albert. He was hanging around the door of the shop, gawking, smiling from ear to ear at me. He was undressing me with his eyes and the game was not fun anymore. I knew after I got Mungo straight I had to find a cure for that dumb fucking love potion I gave to Albert.

"Tell him to stop that," I said harshly. I sat in a chair next Mungo. He laid there quietly, mumbling to himself. Some of the swelling on his eyes and cheeks had gone down. The puffiness and red marks around his mouth and chin was worse.

"Albert!" Jeanie barked. "Knock it off!" She immediately gave me a hug and whispered words of encouragement.

Albert breathed heavily, looked away. He touched his nose with a chubby hand. "I'm sorry. I hope things get better, Evelina."

"Hello," Hopper said to Albert. "Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

Albert shrugged, gave Jeanie and I a hurt look. "Yeah," he told Hopper. "Thank you."

Hopper smiled. "Come with me, my boy." Hopper took Albert by the elbow and led him to the kitchen. "Give the girls a chance to talk."

They disappeared and my rage showed its true colors.

"I need to find the son of a bitch!" I declared. I stood and began to pace.

"Take it easy." Jeanie tried to calm me down.

"There is no calming a brewing storm!" I screamed and heard it echo in the back of my mind. That was it. I'd

already sealed the fate of the thief with a promise.

"What does that mean?" Jeanie asked. "Look, you need to keep a calm head about this. You don't even know where he is."

"Wait…" I thought about it. "That spell tracker. I never heard back from it."

"How would you?"

"Jeanie…" I shook my head. She glared at me. She wanted an answer. So I gave her one. "I would've received word either by messenger. Human, or otherwise. Another way would be to get a newspaper."

"A newspaper. Uh-huh. Just delivered for you, I suppose."

"Yes. Just for me. Or a letter."

"You get a newspaper anyway."

"Let me explain," I said.

"Oh, please do." Jeanie was sarcastic and at this point sarcasm would only set me, if it wasn't Jeanie that is. I was in no mood for it.

"Newspaper arrives. I get two if I'd used a spell tracker. The one without the information I need. That would appear either as a headline with an article, or as an ad. Or…"

Jeanie nodded. "Okay. Or… what?"

I sighed. "Obituary."

"Unless that jerk Gilley Rolf stole your paper again." Jeanie said.

We exchanged glances. "That's exactly what happened," I told her.

I rushed out of the bedroom to the front door of the shop. I pushed open the front door and strode across the street like a mad hen whose chicks were being hassled by a fox. There he was. Gilley Rolf, standing outside his Piano store, talking to an elderly woman that ran the antique shop next to him. The elderly woman saw me first. She gasped and

hobbled into her shop. She locked her door and peered out the window at us.

"Evelina!" He cried out, took two steps backwards. "You look angry… is – is - is everything alright-alright-alright?" Gilley spoke with a nervous twitch to begin with. At this moment, he began to stutter after every other word. I marched right up to him, face to face. "Something wrong?"

"I want my paper," I said through clenched teeth.

Gilley began to hyperventilate. "I – I – I - I… don't have it… " he sputtered, the fingers on his right hand danced up and down his neck.

"Give me my paper!" I screamed. A bit of saliva flew from my mouth and hit Gilley on the cheek. He wiped it away slowly, swallowed hard.

"Look," he giggled timidly. "Here's what happened. I was stealing your paper-and I'm sorry for that. Truly-truly-truly — sorry. Anyways… um… Sheriff Lewis saw me. He came into my store. He seemed just as angry as you are now." Gilley thought a second, his bottom lip fluttered. "He pulled his gun on me. Told me to the hand the newspaper over. So…"

"He has my fucking newspaper!?" I bellowed. The whole street stopped, stared at me. I didn't care. How dare they get into my business? If they aren't careful they will end up with curses… no. That's how I felt and I had to stop the angry thoughts immediately before I cast such terrible spells.

"Evelina… I'm - I'm sorry…"

"You better be sorry, old man…"

A car pulled up beside us. I looked up and saw it was a sheriff's cruiser. Sheriff Lewis was sitting there, nursing a Dr. Pepper, sucking his teeth. He held up yesterday's paper.

"You looking for this?' He said lazily, cleared his throat. "I think you should come down to the station with me, Ms. Giles."

"I can't," I told him. "I have things to do… people to see."

"I bet so." He chuckled. "I'm sure it's the same people that I have seen."

"What makes you say that, Sheriff?" I was one twitch away of snapping my fingers and melting the skin from his face.

"Ohhh, you know. A few very weird deaths have visited our pleasant town, Ms. Giles." Lewis let out a deep sigh. "I think you have something to do with them."

"What… deaths?" At first I thought he talking about Winston Daniels. But that wasn't in his jurisdiction.

"Just get in the car, Ms. Giles." he chewed his gums as if he was chewing a cud. "Don't make me arrest you in front of everyone out here on the street." His sour face changed. It was a more sadistic expression washed over with a fake, terrifying smile. "Let me rephrase that. Get in the fucking car before I arrest you violently and spread your fucking brains all over the cobble streets!" He pressed a button on his door and all the doors on the police cruiser unlocked. "Please," Sheriff Lewis said gently.

I opened the car door, hesitated. If I waved my hand and the skin melted from his face, what would be the repercussions of actions? Would birds swarm the town and attack everyone? Or would there just be a state-wide power outage? My biggest fear: Mungo would die.

I wouldn't be able to live with myself if that happened.

I got in the police cruiser. I took hold of the strap of the seat belt and pulled it over my shoulder. "Do I need to wear my seat belt, Sheriff? I wouldn't want us to get a ticket."

He spat out whatever it was he'd been chewing on. "I think we'll be okay, Ms. Giles," Lewis said, put the car in drive. "Relax. We're just going to have a little talk. That's all."

18

The police station was a small brick building next to the only radio station ninety-five miles west of Richmond. Right there across the street from Augustus University and Groper's supermarket. Traffic gets congested on Friday evenings and Monday mornings, when everyone realizes they have to commute to Gorshin City for their jobs, or come back to the University for School.

I sat on a metal chair with a bent left leg. Sheriff Lewis sat at a huge mahogany desk that was obviously too large for his small office, and most likely the most expensive item the county had bought in years. Not a lot of guns on display as a person would think. As a matter of fact, the only guns I saw were on Lewis' belt and on Deputy Fugg's desk. A terrible cartoony portrait of Sheriff Lewis hung in an oversized frame behind him. It was obvious it was there to cover a crack or a hole. Fugg kept coming up behind me and smelling my hair. He'd back off when I'd turn to show him the embers burning in my eyes.

Couldn't have been creepier if Ted Bundy was there with duct tape and a knife.

"Am I being charged with anything?" I asked them.

Fugg laughed, approached my back again and I turned the evil on him. He backed off, began staring at the walls.

"Have I slapped one on you?" Lewis threw his hands up. "No. I have not. Look, I'm going to be the one who asks the questions right now. Just shut up and speak when spoken to."

Ohhhh, these two were asking for it. I was fighting that urge to do something with every fiber in my being.

"I think you need to be more careful how you speak to a woman, Sherriff," I said. "Especially one that's been scorned."

"I'm married, darling," Lewis said. "I'm used to a scorned woman."

That was an odd thing to say. Since Sheriff Lewis' wife Maude died in a car wreck a year ago.

Fugg burst into a hyena laugh, cupped his empty holster. "Scorned woman," he repeated Lewis's words. He took a few steps closer to my back. I could feel his horrible, hot breath on my neck again. I turned and he backed up, began studying a photograph of a confederate officer, one that possibly started this miserable town.

"You see that cell over there?"

"Yeah. It's covered in blood. You guys are terrible housekeepers," I said, a smirk crossed my lips sideways.

"I had a suspect in here a few days ago. Henry Kelly. A known perv from Charlottesville and previously Trenton, New Jersey. You know him?"

"Sorry, Sheriff." I giggled. "I don't know any pervs."

"I think you remember him," Lewis said. "Nasty looking, lanky fella? Wearing dirty, smelly, track suit? You helped find him when he took that gypsy boy's little girl."

"Oh. Him. Yeah," I said. "What about him?"

"Ms. Giles… When Deputy Fugg left here at one in the morning that man was alive. The door of the Sheriff's office/jailhouse, was locked," Sheriff Lewis said. "This morning, when I entered the office with my secretary Delia Franks, we saw a male body torn to shreds. Blood everywhere. There… there was a weird smell, too. Like a lemon-wood smell…"

"Smelled weird," Fugg said. "Yep. That's what Mrs. Frank said. We can't put our finger on that smell."

"Jesus. Never seen so much blood,' Lewis shook his

head. "Cut to pieces. Lower half of him looked like a ribbon."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay? I tell you a man was torn to shreds, body parts slung around like fucking papier Mache and you say is okay."

"What the fuck do you want me to say, Sheriff?" I screamed at him. "This is getting stupid. All I did was help a man get his child back. Hell, I served my duty as law abiding citizen! I gave back to this fucked up little burg!"

"That sounds like a confession," Fugg said. Lewis gave him the stink eye again and Fugg closed his mouth, looked away.

"I'm just….asking questions. No need to get upset. Don't listen to that 'idjit'," Lewis pointed at Fugg was disappointed at what Lewis had called him. Hurt was all over his face. "I am however going to ask strong questions. I'm going to be blunt."

"You can fuck yourself," I hissed at him.

"What did you say? Huh!? What did you just say to me!?" He screeched. His voice was thick, like he had a lot of saliva forming under his tongue and he forgot how to swallow it.

"You heard me!" I screamed back.

"Whoa," Fugg said, holding his hands out as if he were keeping us apart, even though he was nowhere near Sheriff Lewis and I. "Everybody calm down. Evelina," Fugg smoothed out his tone. "We just want to know where your assistant… butler… um… security…"

"His name is Mungo," I said through clenched teeth. Enunciating his name with bite.

"Yes. Him. Where was Mungo…"

"At my fucking house!"

"Okay, okay." Fugg showed his hands again. "Fine.

You can vouch for him?"

"Of course I can! He's been… sick. Very sick. I've been… nursing him back to health."

"With magic, I bet." Lewis threw that in. He rubbed the left side of his cheek. A red splotch started to form. Then it started to spread to his chin. Very itchy. Very, very red. He scratched harder.

"That's right." I laughed. "Magic. Uh-huh. You are so smart, Sheriff. Hey… you have a terrible rash. You might want to see a doctor about it," I said. "Or… a witch."

A realization came to Sheriff Lewis. He was no longer sneering at me. He was slightly miffed. But he contained his anger somewhat. He also dug those grimy nails into the skin of his chin and left cheek, and that terrible rash got worse, started to spread to his right cheek and neck.

"I'd like a Lawyer," I said calmly.

"You don't need one," Fugg blurted out nervously.

"Shit…" Lewis now tried to casually stop scratching his neck. He instead, began to rub it fiercely. "We're just talking, little lady." Lewis rolled his eyes. "What can you tell me about Cyril Danforth, Anna Vereen and Gus Vereen?"

"I don't know them," I answered dryly. "I want a Lawyer."

"I think you do," Lewis said. We stared at each other in silence. "You see, Anna is dead. Pecked to death by a bunch of Turkey buzzards and Crows. Gus, same damn thing… except he had Cyril's fingerprints. Cyril, well, he died of a heart attack two months ago."

"So what?"

"So what!? So what?! That's all you can say?" Lewis shook his head and chuckled. Fugg joined in.

"No." My voice went an octave higher than usual. "I can say: I want a lawyer," I sang.

"Look," Lewis said. "This shit is weird. At first… I

was thinking of asking you for help."

"Really?" Somehow, I didn't feel like a suspect, but I was still confused.

"Yes. Then, Fugg here, well… he found this." Lewis took a small box from his drawer. My spells were inside. "Now, we kind of think you had something to do with this. I'm not a believer in magic, or psychics. But Fugg here is."

"Yep. I believe in all that shit," Fugg spoke up. His face was twisted in fear as he related his story to us. "I once saw my Uncle who'd died ten years ago in Coleman's Deli, buying a damn Tuna salad sandwich."

Lewis tossed the newspaper at me. "Another oddity is this. Look in that paper. Headline talks about North Korea." He tossed another newspaper to my lap. "This headline talks about Cyril and Anna dying in the headline. On that little white sticker-bottom left corner-has your name and address. Have anything to say, Ms. Giles?"

"Sheriff, I think you are mistaken," I said, held up the front page. "Headline says the same thing as your newspaper."

Lewis's jaw dropped. He rose from his chair quickly and reached across his desk. He tore the newspaper from my hands.

"What is this shit?!" He bellowed. "Thirty seconds ago that was a different headline!"

Fugg trotted to his side. "Let me see." Lewis shoved the newspaper in Fugg's face. "Yep. They're the same, Sheriff."

Lewis ignored his idiot deputy. He jabbed a fat, crinkled finger in my direction. "You best not fuck with me, little missy!" He screamed. All three jowls shook like jello in a bowl with each syllable. "Magic or no fucking magic, I'll eat your liver for breakfast, bitch!"

"Is that right, Sheriff?" Jeanie was standing at the

door, holding her phone out. "Can I quote you?"

"What are you doing here!?" Lewis sputtered.

"I'm here to write a story on how a small town Sheriff arrested my friend for no apparent reason after he'd forcefully stolen her newspaper using his weapon," Jeanie said.

"Sheriff…" Fugg dropped the newspaper, letting the other sections and advertisements fall to his second hand shoes. "She's recording everything…" He said, frightened.

"Every word," Jeanie said. "I've been standing here for the last ten minutes. What if a gunman just walked in here and decided to shoot the place up? You two would be dead. I thought you went to the police academy, Sheriff."

"Get the fuck out of here!" Lewis screamed.

"Sheriff…" Fugg whined. "D-don't curse… " Fugg stuttered, waved his arms nervously. "She's recording!"

Lewis sniffed the air. A gentle breeze must have come through with a delightful smell. His demeanor did a complete three - sixty. "I'm always happy to meet with our local press." Lewis chuckled. "I think all of this was a misunderstanding." He cleared his throat, gave a brief snarl, before easing back in a sick man's grin.

"Would you care to give a statement?" Jeanie shifted her phone toward Fugg. He didn't say anything. He just shook his head quickly and took a step backwards. Fugg held his hands up as if he were defending a punch to the head. "I suppose my friend is allowed to leave?"

Lewis scoffed. "Of course," he said. "She could have left any time she wanted."

I stood, trotted to the door, Jeanie followed. But I stopped at the doorframe. "Wait." I smacked the wall. I turned to Fugg and Lewis and asked: "Who was the other set of deaths?" Neither spoke because Jeanie was still recording. I nodded to her and she turned off the recording app on her

phone. "You said there was three set of deaths, Sheriff."

"I already told you who they were." Lewis said grudgingly.

"No. You mentioned other people."

"Okay. You wanna know." He chuckled rubbed his neck ardently. "We found that homeless guy who sits in front of your door. Bovey is his name. Sliced up, too. Oh… yeah… also… Hamilton Cross and Olga Daniels. They were sliced to pieces if you wanna know how they died. Torn apart by a broad sword of some kind. Both of them. Suspect entered a locked home… the Daniels home… and the murder scene smelled like Thyme."

19

I remember when my father passed away. I was only eighteen and headed to Augustus University with Jeanie. We both had our heads in the clouds and I was trying hard to stay away from practicing magic. Magic is what killed my father, and in the long run, what killed my mother as well. I had a lot of living to do and I wanted nothing to do with the occult, or any of that bullshit my family had been linked to for well over a century or more.

Magic drained my father. He became an old man at forty-three. His hair became white overnight. The muscles in his right arm refused to work with his brain. For many years I remember he would hold that arm as if he'd had a stroke. Casting one too many spells with that hand. That offending hand. Eventually, right before he passed, he'd lost mobility and had become senile.

He was only fifty one years old when he died.

My mother died of a mysterious illness when I was seven. When I was fifteen, my father broke down and told me the real truth. She died from a curse. Father had a rivalry with another spell caster. He wouldn't say who it was, for fear they would come after me. The spell cast was a horrible, rabid creature that ate away my mother's insides. The doctors thought it was cancer.

I've always thought my family was cursed.

Magic is also what has amped my depression. I go through normal depression every so often. Usually, that goes away in a day. The real blues I get every two months can stay with me for weeks. After I heard about Hamilton Cross and Olga Daniels, I immediately went home and stayed in my bedroom for three days.

In those two days, Jeanie had finished nursing Mungo back to health. Hopper left the shop and went back to the streets. He didn't say goodbye or anything. One morning Mungo saw that he'd vacated the living room and hadn't returned that night as he'd done so a few days before while out buying groceries. Jeanie grew tired of talking to me through my bedroom door. She finally told me she couldn't stay any longer, she had a deadline to meet. The telephone in my office rang constantly and no one answered it.

At that time, I was done with everything.

In those three days, holed up in my bedroom, it felt like walls were closing in on me. I cried nonstop. I blamed myself for Olga's death. For Bovey's death. For Hamilton's death. And indirectly, the deaths of Cyril Danforth, Anna Vereen and Gus Vereen. More importantly, my father and mother's death, even though they died years ago.

That's just how I felt.

Then something occurred to me. I was not responsible for Winston Daniels death. That was not my spell. Lying in my bed, covers over my head, I thought more and more about the case. Whose spell killed Winston Daniels? Who stole my spells and what is he gaining from it? What happened with Olga Daniels and Hamilton Cross?

I threw the covers off and hopped out of bed.

I didn't even bother to dress. I was in a hurry to get back on track. Anyway, it wouldn't be the first time Mungo had seen me in nothing but in a bra and panties. I unlocked my bedroom door. Opening it quickly, the door slammed against the wall. Mungo was just bringing a tray of food to my room. He stopped in the hallway and shifted slightly to let me pass.

"Feeling better?" Mungo asked after his usual groan.

"Oh yes!" I exclaimed, headed to my office. "I feel wonderful!" I heard the phone ring, so I picked my pace, and

began to trot. I let the phone ring, took it off the cradle. I heard a man's voice calling for me, so I hung the phone up. I didn't need any distractions tat that point.

I immediately found the Spell caster Volume three already lying on my desk. I smiled. Mungo was searching for answers too. I thumbed through the book, the thin pages ran through my fingers like rainwater. Then I found what I was looking for. I had a suspicion what or who uses Thyme with their spells. It's an old family tradition.

"Are you ready to eat?" He turned a bit, and started to follow me to my office.

The phone rang again. "Food?" I shouted from my office. Mungo stood in the doorway, still holding the tray, two pork chops on one plate along with chicken stuffing, a glass of ice-tea, and two slices of white bread on a saucer. "Who has time to eat when we have a case to solve?" I answered the phone on the sixth ring. I said hello and the trembling voice on the other end was Jeanie's husband, Albert.

"Hi Evelina," Albert said in a hushed voice. "Um… I'm calling…"

"Albert? What the fuck do you want?" I was already annoyed by Mungo trying to force food on me. I didn't need a love sick moron calling me. In my head, I was behind three steps in the investigation.

Albert stuttered, sputtered, hemmed and hawed, before he finally spit it out.

"Well," he chuckled. "I was calling to check on you."

"I'm fine," I was short with him.

"That's just super…" Albert said. Super? Who says that anymore? "Just marvellous…."

"What do you want, albert?"

He let out a very long, dry, sigh. "Say… do you… uh… would you like to go for a drink?"

"What! No!" There was a long silence between us.

This little game I'd created casting a love spell on my best friend's husband just because I was bored, was becoming tiresome. I would have removed the spell, only… I couldn't remember what spell it was. I'm not joking when I say there are thousands of love spells in the world and they all have their little flourishes. If you monkey with the wrong spell, you could have a psychotic on your hands and possibly a killing spree.

I heard a motor running in the background.

"Albert?" I said sweetly.

"Uh, yes?" Albert was hopeful I'd changed my mind.

"Where are you calling from?"

"Oh!" He said excitedly. "From my car! Do you need a ride?"

"No… thank you… where is Jeanie?"

"Right here," Albert answered, less enthusiastically. "She's asleep, here in the car. We were at my mothers in Greenville, having dinner…"

"Albert?"

"Yes?"

"Stop calling me!"

He started to break down. His voice became faint and sickly. "I can't," he whined. "Evelina… you're like crack…"

I heard the phone ripped from his hands. Sounded as though the phone fell to the floorboard of the car. A distant female voice was screaming at him. Calling Albert every name in the book at the same time delivering some harsh blows to the head. The phone signal died suddenly.

I hung up and sat behind my chair.

"Shit," I said. "I do need a ride."

20

For two weeks, Jeanie wouldn't answer my phone calls or texts. I could understand her being mad at Albert. But taking it out on me was ridiculous. He's the one acting out. Besides, a person can't get mad at another person for something old. It's like retrying them for the same crime twice. Right?

Just because I didn't have Jeanie at my side didn't mean I had to wait around and do nothing on the case. No. That meant I had to take the bus. Mungo can drive. I'm not so sure it would be a good idea he pull out the old 1934 dodge his father owned. Five miles down the road and we'd need a tow back to the shop.

I stood at the corner of Lyle by Gilbert's Drugstore. I sat on the bench next to a man dressed in black jogging pants and a Celtics jersey. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, balding with blondish hair. He wasn't tall, but he was lean and I noticed he was wearing a fake nose ring. He lit a cigarette and strangely, he didn't smoke it.

"You want one." He offered the pack, a cigarette hanging out of the open seal.

"No." I shook my head. "Why did you light one if you aren't going to smoke it?"

"I am smoking it," the man said. He never once put the cigarette between his lips. He held it loosely with his middle finger and forefinger. After a long pause, he introduced himself. "My name's Travis."

I was feeling really uncomfortable at this point. I tried ignoring him and he kept saying his name. Finally, I answered. "Okay. So what?"

"Are you going to be rude or are you going to tell me

your name?"

I quickly stood and began to walk away. Screw the bus, I'd take my chance on finding a ride somewhere else. "I'd rather be rude," I yelled back to him.

"No reason to be that way, Mama." Travis threw the cigarette down. "If my smoking bothered you, you could have said something."

"Not the smoking bothering me." I walked to the drugstore entrance. "Just the crazy bothering me."

"Hey!" Travis called back. "I heard you were looking for the guy who stole some spells from you."

I turned to him and gave him a look. "If you knew who I was…"

"I had to make sure, Mama." Travis shrugged.

"Stop calling me 'Mama'," I demanded. "Who the hell are you?" I walked back to him. He flinched as if I was going to hit him.

"Yes ma'am. I won't call you 'Mama'. You know who I am. Your friend Jeanie talked to me. She told me to look you up."

"Wait… Jeanie?" Just when I thought Jeanie had abandoned me, her help comes in at the right time. I knew she still loved me.

"The reporter," Travis quipped.

"Okay," I agreed.

"Of course." Travis touched his forehead and closed his eyes. "I may have been a different person that day…"

I realized who he was. "You're Joe Dancer…" I whispered.

"Hey!" Joe Dancer screamed and stepped forward as if he was going to hit me. Then he sighed, backed up, and looked confused. "I… I really… don't know who I am…"

I smiled reassuringly. I took his arm in mine and we walked toward a little building that had two restaurants on

two different floors. We walked down small stone steps passed a sign stating it was Bob Lilly's Best BBQ.

"I know who you are," I told him. "That's all that matters."

"Wait," Dancer jerked his arm out of my grasp. "Lady… you're scaring me," he breathed heavily. "No one else knows who I am. And… how in the hell can you get in my head?"

"I'm the one who's looking for spells stolen from me, remember?" He glared at me, frightened. "Don't worry," I giggled. "It's just magic!"

"Oh." Joe Dancer seemed relieved. Then he slipped back into his Travis persona. "We getting some BBQ, Mama?"

I laughed at him calling me 'Mama' this time "No," I said. "Not BBQ-but the best BBQ you've ever had!"

The place was busy. Ten out of the twelve booths were occupied. Mully was waiting tables, which was an oddity. He mostly did the cooking and worked the register, maybe seating customers once in a while. This was a first.

Mully gave me a dirty look. His hands were on his hips. He must have forgotten to take the food stained apron off. That was one of his pet peeves showing the customers any filth of any kind was, as he stated many times before, bad for business. Mully prided himself on cleanliness and was a Nazi about it. I know this because I worked for him years ago for exactly one week.

More than militant about everything, was his obnoxious obsessiveness over the Dallas Cowboys. Hence the name of the restaurant, "Bob Lilly's Best BBQ". I never got around to asking Mully who the hell Bob Lilly was. From the framed photographs on the wall and autographed jersey over the entrance, I gathered he played football for the cowboys. It wasn't enough to see his brutal actions in

photos, but a statement on a poster showed he was "Mr. Cowboy"

"What's he doing in my restaurant?" Mully screamed.

"Take it easy, Mully." I shot past him, leading Joe to the first booth available.

"Jesus." Mully held his nose. "He stinks to high heaven, Evelina."

"We just want something to eat. You can't turn down paying customers."

"I can if they're bothering the customers," Mully stated and looked around. No one followed up with a complaint. He sighed and nodded. "Okay, okay. Twenty minutes is all I can stand to smell him! By the way," he tapped Joe Dancer on the shoulder, realized the mistake he'd made and wiped his hand on the food stained apron. "Stay out of my dumpsters, creep!" Mully walked away. He told an older lady wearing an imitation Cowboys jersey to take our order.

Joe Dancer stood in his seat and saluted Mully. "Anything you say, Captain."

"Get down from there. I don't feel like being kicked out of places today," I informed. Dancer sat in his seat, folded his hands on his lap.

"I'll be a good little boy, Mama," he said.

Now he was getting on my nerves again. "Stop calling me that," I growled.

"Alright, alright. Just trying to lighten things up."

"Here." I took some Marie Clarisse body perfume from my handbag and slid across the table. "Go to the bathroom and use the whole on you. Getting rank in here."

Without saying a word, Joe Dancer stood and ambled to the men's room. He hung his head as he sailed passed other patrons, who, as you might guess, held a hand to their noses and watched Joe with a suspicious eye. Minutes

later, he returned to the booth. The smell was actually worse with wildflower and Jasmine dumped on it. The rest of the customers noticed too. Strangely, no one complained. Mully never even came out of the kitchen to kick us out.

The waitress brought us a plate special with cokes. The plate special was a BBQ sandwich, extra vinegar sauce, fries, and a side of greens. The coleslaw was already on the sandwich.

"Here you go, hun," the waitress said as cheerful as she could with the bad smell invading her little up-turned nose.

"We didn't order this," I said. "We haven't ordered anything yet."

Joe started eating right away. He wasn't going to question it, and he wasn't going to be questioned about it, even if the order was a mistake.

"I know," the waitress said. "Mully sent it over. Free of charge. Except…" the waitress let the words trail off.

"Except?" I repeated as a question.

"You eat that and skedaddle." The waitress motioned her pretty blonde ponytail at Joe. Joe didn't notice her. He was busy chowing down with remarkable speed, yet he was neat about it, and even used a napkin to wipe his mouth. Hmm. A bum with manners. "Homeless people are bad for business," the waitress continued. "Mully's words," she quickly added. "Not mine."

"Thank you." I gave her a sliver of a smile. I didn't want to protest Mully's generosity. Even if it was more of a payoff to shove off.

I decided to eat as slowly as I could. A bite here, a sip there. Just to screw with Mully and the others who really didn't want Joe and I in the restaurant. It's kind of fun to mess with people. I gave Joe my fries. In return, he had to answer some questions.

"Who is the guy who keeps going through your bags, Joe?"

He gave me a confused look. "I already told your friend."

"Jeanie."

"Yeah. I guess that's her name. She told me to look for you. She interviewed me for an article on my kind."

"Your kind?"

"Yeah," Joe chuckled. "Homeless."

"Ah." I nodded. "Say…" I leaned in, whispered, "You aren't really crazy, are you?"

"What do you mean, Mama?"

"I think someone's been looking for you," I said. Joe stopped eating the fries. He sat back in his chair and snarled at me. "This mental illness, coming up with different personalities, it hasn't thrown anyone any one off."

"You don't know nothin'," Joe said.

"Oh, I can tell. You shift back and forth from Joe Dancer and… I can't remember who you are right now…"

"So what? I don't think me becoming another person has to do with you or your case."

"I have a feeling it does," I told him. The smell had gotten to me. I couldn't finish the BBQ sandwich. I pushed my plate to Joe. He reached over and grabbed it quickly, in case I changed my mind. He wrapped the three quarters eaten sandwich and put it in his pants pocket. "Good idea. You'll be hungry later. Joe… you might as well tell me what's going on."

"I don't have anything to tell you…"

"Who is after you?"

"Look," Joe said, getting agitated. "Who is looking for me, has nothing to do with you. What that crazy hippy guy was looking for was cash or food. You really need to talk to Hopper."

"Hopper? Why Hopper?"

"Hopper don't live with me. Hopper was there looking for that hippy guy. Hopper works for those Gypsies."

"Conny Barabbas," I said. "Right?"

"The one and only. That hippy guy stole something from him."

"Why do you keep calling him 'that hippy guy'?"

"He dresses like one," Joe said. "He has a bald head and a ponytail on top. Wears a Moo moo. What else would he be?"

"I don't know what he could be. I haven't seen him yet. I know I want to, real bad. I owe him something."

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Some pain," I told Joe. "Let's get out of here before Mully kicks us out."

I looked up and saw two men staring at us. One man was tall, pale. He wore a uniform like the Beatles did on Sgt. Pepper's lonely Hearts Club record album, and a black top hat. He also had a monocle on his left eye. His long grey beard was unkempt, straggly.

He looked familiar. Then I realized I had seen him before. His name was Simon Abaddon. He was Reverend Fulbright's assistant.

The other man was much shorter. Almost a dwarf, but a shade taller. He was completely bald with piercings in his face. He kept dumping salt and sugar on the table and mixing them together before wiping the mound on the floor with his short, fat, stubby fingers. He wore a bright red, three-piece suit with a white vest, all of which seemed way too big for the man.

Both of them stared a hole in me and Joe, which was disconcerting to the max.

We left Mully's place and as soon as our feet hit the

sidewalk, those two men were right behind us. I picked up the pace, passing a family of five. I saw that Joe was stuck behind them, so I broke in the middle of their mob. I took hold of Joe's arm and pulled him through, pushing the two women out of the way.

"Rude much!" I heard the younger woman say.

I didn't care. I needed to lose those men, whoever they were. We turned a corner at the post office and ended up in an alley behind a line of smaller restaurants and the bank. No outlet in sight, just a brick wall to a car park and dumpsters scattered on the cobble street. Those men were right behind us.

Shit. We were stuck.

I whispered a few words to a spell that would transport us safely to my shop when I realized Simon appeared in front of me. He had a wicked smile on his face. It seemed as though his entire beard turned upward in a cynical fashion. His eyes were hard and screwed in like two black marbles.

"Hello," he said in a sing-song voice. "I believe you are one of us." He lifted his right fist and punched me square in the nose.

I fell fast. I grunted and my natural reaction was to squeal as I threw my hands up to cover my face. Before I landed on the cobble stone ground, I felt a terrible sharp pain in the bridge of nose. When I landed on my ass, the blood had already started run from my broken nose and seep into my parted mouth. That was a taste I always hated.

The pain was so severe I had to keep my eyes shut to keep it at bay. I heard running footsteps. So I forced my eyes open and saw Joe Dancer being chased by the dwarf in the bright red suit. The dwarf wasn't fast at all, but Joe was a clumsy runner. His left foot kept getting in way of his right foot. By the third step, Joe had fallen on his face. Trying hard

to keep his balance, he placed both hands and knees on the ground and crawled until he fell completely on his stomach.

The dwarf approached Joe, slowly. He giggled as he unsheathed a small, thin knife from the breast pocket of his jacket.

I looked up and saw that Simon reaching for my hair. Not really sure how I knew to do this, but I clasped my hand around a brick that was lose and tossed it over-handed into the tall man's crotch. His black eyes widened and his smiling mouth turned into an o as he yelped. He fell to his knees, both hands on his balls. He coughed, his face became three shades of red and purple.

I stood quickly and trotted past Simon. He desperately tried to grab my legs, but I skirted him. I ran toward Joe. I pushed the dwarf away just as his blade swiftly came down. The blade struck some rocks and the tip folded up slightly before it broke. Joe rolled to his left.

The dwarf was thrown backwards. He let out a high pitched scream, his arms flailing about. When he landed on his back, I kicked him in the mouth with the tip of my boot. The dwarf screamed again. Blood drained quickly from his torn bottom lip.

I felt hands on my shoulder. I screamed in reaction to being touched, my right elbow struck who ever put their hands on me. My elbow caught Simon in the throat. He gagged, both hands immediately took hold of his Adam's apple. I turned and ran both hands across his face. My fingernails dug deep in the skin under his eyes, and dragged down his cheeks, adding insult to injury.

Somehow, Simon mustered a scream. His hands moved from his throat to his face. Joe kept rolling as if he's been on fire. He was rolling toward a gutter. By the eighth roll, he'd disappeared. Just like in an episode of Bewitched, minus the sound effects, Joe Dancer was gone, right in front

of our eyes.

"What the fuck?!" I bellowed.

I noticed the dwarf and Simon ran off. They were rounding a corner, headed to Ferris and Crème, where the old fire station was located. The dwarf actually picked up some speed, his short fat legs pumping furiously. He passed Simon, who had lost his top hat in the process. The top hat had blown into the gutter.

When I finally caught my breath, I screamed taunts at them. "That's right! You pussies! Come on back get some more of this! You fucking pussies!"

Strange thing happened right after that.

An albino deer appeared from behind a dumpster. He stood completely still, as if he were an oil painting. I felt a pang in my heart. Or is that what normal people call the heebie-jeebies? I don't know. The whole situation was weird and this topped it off. We locked eyes for a moment and then he dashed off into an alley.

Later, I went to the clinic on Gage. It was a small, dank room with twenty or so metal chair in the waiting room. The red-haired, bulky nurse behind the glass window had left, took her coffee mug with her. I was the only one in the waiting room. When I came in, only a man in a brown overcoat and a nasty cough was there. The nurse called his name as soon as I sat down. She told me she'd be right with me.

That was forty-five minutes ago.

The door slid open, making an ear-piercing squeak. Jeanie walked briskly in. She sat beside me and dropped her handbag on the floor beside the chair. Without saying a word she picked up a copy of TIME magazine and flipped through the pages. She breathed a heavy sigh, not even looking at me.

"I thought you were mad at me," I said. I touched the bridge my nose to see if I could wipe away the dried

blood. A sharp pain filtered through my face and tears rolled down my cheeks.

"I am,' Jeanie stated, still flipping the pages of the magazine angrily.

"So." I shrugged. "Why are you here?"

"That's a stupid question," She answered.

"This is a dumb situation."

"You're telling me." Jeanie rolled her eyes.

"Why the hell are you here?"

"Again, stupid question." She still didn't look at me.

"Uggg!" I moaned. "You are a very trying person!"

"You damn straight I am! Look with I have to deal with on a daily basis."

"Fuck you, Jeanie."

"Nope," she giggled. 'I know, you've fucked everything else in sight… but not me. Nor will you, or my husband."

"Jeanie! I don't want Albert!" I said.

"Yeah? Then why did you cast that love spell on him?" Finally, she tossed down the magazine and looked me in the eyes.

"I don't know," I whined.

"Yes you do. Don't try that crap on me, Evelina." Jeanie gave me a hard look, bating me.

"Okay… I do know why." Jeanie waited for my next explanation. I couldn't look her in the eyes as I said it. "I'm jealous of you and Albert. Your perfect marriage. The fact you have someone… and I don't."

"You have Mungo," Jeanie said.

"Oh, Jesus," I laughed. "He's lousy in bed, though."

We both laughed.

"Miss," the nurse called out to me. "Could you please fill this out?" She was hanging a clipboard out of the open sliding glass. Actually, she was waving it.

"Go sign in, bitch." Jeanie smiled. "We'll talk about this dumb shit another time."

21

"He disappeared?" Jeanie asked.

Mungo was in my face, examining the bandage on my broken nose. We were back at my shop, sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee. It was good to be among friends, I have to admit. Unlike a few days ago, where I thought it was all on me and I had let everyone down. It's good to know we're all in this together.

"Stop, Mungo." I pushed him out of the way. "Yes, Jeanie. He rolled to the other side of the street, almost in a gutter. Then poof! Well… not really poof. But… yeah. He disappeared. Pretty obvious Joe Dancer is the guy who threw that dust on you, Mungo."

Mungo thought a second, then he said, "Obviously I think I'll break his neck."

"I keep racking my brain with all of this," I sighed. "What do they all want? What are they after?"

Jeanie took out her trusty reporter's notebook the size of a wallet and her trusty ink pen. "Go for it, I'm your Girl Friday," she said. "Just like when we were girls, huh Evelina?"

"Yeah," I smiled. "Just like when we were kids." I stood and began to pace the kitchen. Mungo looked on with a smirk on his face as if this was a skit Jeanie and I used to put on years ago. "Okay… Hamilton Cross. He comes in here to buy a spell to incapacitate a rival for a train ride. Winston Daniels dies from the spell."

"Hold on." Jeanie stopped writing. "Let's get this straight before you rewrite history, Evelina. Mungo?"

"Yes?" Mungo answered after a yawn.

"Did Evelina sell a spell to kill someone?" Jeanie

gave Mungo a stern, uncompromising look as if to say: 'Better tell the truth'.

"No," he said, somewhat uninterested in the way the conversation was going. "He wanted a spell to make Winston Daniels fall asleep. Evelina made the spell so Cross would turn into a girl. He had sex with Daniels."

I chuckled. Mungo and Jeanie cut their eyes at me. "Sorry," I said and cleared my throat.

"That caused a problem," Mungo continued. "Hamilton Cross tried to hurt Evelina when he remembered."

"But," I cut in. "Remember Jeanie, when we interviewed Olga Daniels? Cross was already a lover for both Olga and Winston."

"I didn't come up with that conclusion. How did you?" Jeanie asked.

Ooops. I thought I'd said to everyone what I thought.

"We're getting ahead of ourselves," Mungo said. "We had a break in. After Evelina spent the night with Cross."

"Yeah." Jeanie tapped her pen on the kitchen table. "What the hell, Evelina? You sleep with a man who tries to kill you?"

"Okay. We're not getting into that…" I stopped in the middle of a sentence. "Fuck," I whispered.

"What? What is it?" Jeanie had concern in her voice.

I sighed deeply. "I fucking had him. Damn it."

"Who?" Jeanie urged me to say more, her voice cracking.

"Joe Dancer. He was the one who broke into this shop. He's been stealing spells. He's been selling them to people. He sold Olga and Hamilton a spell to kill Winston. He knew about the spell that turned Hamilton into a woman.

He was blackmailing Hamilton. But what is it Joe Dancer is looking for?"

"Wait. You somehow know Hamilton was a lover to both Olga and Winston… oh. He told you?"

"In not so many words. I put it together. The way he talked, the way Olga talked about their relationship," I said. "We're not done with this puzzle by a longshot. Joe Dancer sold one of my spells to Cyril and Anna to rid themselves of Gus, Anna's brother. I did a spell tracker. That's how I know. Somehow Sheriff Lewis is involved in this."

"Yeah. He sure acts guilty," Jeanie said. "He wants to cover his tracks real fast."

"That night, in the bar. Hamilton Cross and Sheriff Lewis exchanged heated words. Lewis threatened him."

"You think Deputy Fugg knows?" Jeanie put her notebook back in her handbag and her pen back in her coat pocket.

"Probably. That's not a bad idea, Jeanie," I said.

"What idea?"

I smiled at her.

"Don't," she begged. "Evelina don't cast that spell. You might not be able to undo it. Look at Albert."

"Who says I want to undo that spell," I said.

Jeanie sprung from her chair and grabbed her handbag. "You're a real bitch, Evelina!"

"I'm kidding, Jeanie. Wait… wait… please. This spell will only last twenty-four hours. I've already taken the other love spell off of Albert. Okay?"

"I don't believe you." Jeanie took her cell phone from her handbag and immediately dialed Albert's number. He answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello," he said groggily.

"Hi Albert." Jeanie used her seductive voice, the one she uses when she's flirting to get information. I've seen her

use it on Restaurant managers, state troopers, and even maids. A natural born talent in the manipulation department.

"Hi Jeanie," Albert yawned.

"I'm just checking in, Honey. Did you eat the Beef stew I made you?"

"Yeah. Yeah it was real good. Thanks for making it."

"I'm glad you liked it." Jeanie curled the L in glad around the G and clucked her tongue. "I'm here with Evelina."

"Oh. Okay," Albert said. "That's nice. What time will you be home? Or are you staying the night with her?"

He didn't ask how I was. Jeanie was shocked, but also relieved.

"I'll be home in an hour or so," She told Albert, this time in her love-struck flirtation, not the manipulative flirtation.

"Okay. Not a problem," He answered and yawned again.

"Albert?"

"Yeah, Jeanie?"

"I love you," her voice faltered a bit.

"I love you, too, baby. Bye."

The phone went dead and Jeanie was giving me her 'I'm sorry' look. She placed her phone in her handbag. "I, uh, should get going," she told me.

"Okay," I said. I met Jeanie halfway between the backdoor and the kitchen table. We hugged her and she went out the backdoor.

"I love you," Jeanie said as she closed the door.

Mungo was glaring at me, trying to contain a smile.

"What?" I demanded in a bitchy tone. I sat at the kitchen table and drank my coffee that had gotten cold during our Nero Wolfe meeting of the minds. I swallowed it down anyway.

"You didn't take that spell off of Albert, did you?"

"No," I sighed. "I can't remember how to break it! Fuck! I just." I shrugged. "I just cast a sleep spell on him. God, what's wrong with me?"

Mungo laughed. "He answered his phone while he was still asleep." Mungo laughed again, shook his head. "Classic."

"Yeah." I put my head in my hands. "Real classic."

Part 3

"Here Lies Bobby Gorman"

22

It was raining very hard and Holly didn't like it one bit.

Tom forced her to take a drive with him. He wouldn't say where they were driving to or why. He'd only shrug and that stupid grin would creep on his face. Believe it or not, that stupid grin was what attracted Holly to him. Tom was not the best looking man Holly had ever been with. As a matter of fact, even to this day, Holly being thirty-four years old, men still ask her how she, as hot as she is, ended up with a guy like Tom.

Holly wouldn't answer the question. She would just change the subject or throw her head back and laugh wildly. She didn't want to say, nor admit to another soul, that she loved Tom because he lets her be in charge of everything. Finances. Menu for dinner. Even sex in bed. Only thing she lets Tom control is when they ride together in any vehicle, he always drives.

Power turned Holly on to the max.

The Sentra rolled through several puddles on the road and the car swerved a bit. Holly held on to the dashboard with her fingers digging into the hard plastic. She gave Tom the death stare. After the tires rolled over a pothole, Tom pulled the car back on the road.

"What the hell, Tom!" Holly bellowed. She smacked Tom hard on the arm. He pulled away and made a face of excruciating pain. They drove a few more lengths before Tom recovered, that stupid grin creeping back on his face.

"Ooops." Tom laughed. "I should be looking at the road more instead of you."

"Whatever," Holly said, disappointed by his last reaction. "Where are we going, Tom?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Just taking a ride."

"You're trying your best for a big blow - up, aren't you? I don't like surprises," Holly said.

"Hmm. I don't know, Holly," Tom said. He was proud of himself for thinking of this. More than a few times, Holly had mentioned She wanted so badly to do this certain thing, but hadn't the confidence to try it. "Sometimes you do."

"You're not taking me to Mother's, are you?"

"No." Tom stopped smiling. He glanced out of his window as if he was ashamed. "I won't make that mistake again."

"Good," Holly said. "I don't want to see that old bitch ever again for the rest of my life."

"Let's not talk about that, please," Tom said, moving around in his seat uncomfortably. He was rather a little proud of himself. Throughout the entire conversation, his concentration on driving was dead on. Hardly any swerves. Just the one time. That silly grin crept on his face again.

Holly saw a sign that said Hammersmith ten miles, Rory twenty miles, Blackwoods three. They were leaving Augustus?

"Tom. Where the hell are we going?" Holly blurted out. "Ah! Don't you dare say it!"

"But it is!" Tom giggled.

"We're traveling to Blackwoods. There's nothing in Blackwoods, but mountainside and farmland."

"There's a little more to it, Holly," Tom said.

"No, Tom," she cackled. "I've seen cows before. Should I count how many barns I see? I'm not sure I have enough air in my lungs to count that high."

"Just sit back, Holly. Enjoy the drive."

Tom turned his signal light on and the car turned down Evening Shoals, the old railroad station that had been

closed down for nearly fifty years. After the mudslide, the county decided to spend money on a newer train station out in Brightly. An army base had just been built and Brightly was informed that was where the army would send new recruits for boot camp. Suddenly, Brightly became a boomtown. Evening Shoals became a ghost town of sorts.

Holly was afraid.

The car passed by old abandoned houses with hollow frames and weeds grown up to the windows. A brick building with no roof was once the local high school and the building next to it, with all the windows broken out of it, was the court house and jail. A few hillbillies who rarely stray out of their own bloodline still live below in the hollows. But if anyone was seen walking around, at this hour, in this rainstorm, they were more than likely homeless.

"Tom." Holly breathed uneasily. "Where are we going for real? I don't like this at all…"

Tom turned the signal light on again. The car turned down a long dark lane where a trailer park sat with nothing surrounding four run down double-wide's.

Holly gasped. "Tom…"

"It's all right, Holly."

"This… feels weird…"

"Come on," Tom said. "Where's your sense of adventure?'

"Tom… turn the car around… please…" Holly begged. "Let's just go home… have a quiet evening…"

"Holly, darling. Come on."

"Don't come on me, Tom! This shit is getting weird! I don't like it!"

"I'm trying to do something nice for you! You always treat me like shit!"

"I treat you the way you the way you want to be treated! You're nothing but a spineless wimp!"

"You're a controlling bitch!"

"Fuck you, Tom!"

"Fuck you, Holly!"

A man stepped out of the driving rain and Tom stopped the car. He was drenched from head to toe, wearing slacks and a grey hoodie. He walked up to the car and opened the door. He sat down just as Holly slid toward Tom. The man removed the hood from his head. He smoothed out strands of hair that was sticking up. He smiled at Tom and Holly.

"You guys are late."

"Sorry, Hamilton," Tom said. "We kind of got lost."

"No problem," Cross said.

"Holly… Why don't you say hello to Hamilton," Tom said as he put the car in drive and touched the gas pedal with his shoe. The car sputtered and pulled out of dark lane.

Holly smiled, placed a hand behind Hamilton Cross's neck as she pulled his face to hers. Their kiss lasted a while, Cross moving his tongue all around Holly's mouth in search of her tongue. He found it just as she began to pull her lips from his. They looked deep into each other's eyes.

"Hello," Holly said.

"Hello," Cross smirked.

"You like this surprise?" Tom said, watching Hamilton Cross slide his hand across his wife's leg, fingering the hole in her bleached out jeans.

"I think I can live with this surprise," Holly giggled, but the giggle was cut short with the blood curdling scream interjected by Tom.

He had taken his eyes off the road to see how far Cross and Holly would go in public when the car ran up on a small black Honda stopped in the middle of the road. A man was in the middle of removing the dead body of a female deer when the headlights of Tom's car blinded him.

The crash was sudden. The impact caused Tom to momentarily blackout. When he came to, he was on a stretcher, and Holly was crying at his side, blood streaming from an open wound on her forehead. She was tugging at Tom as the EMT was loading him into an ambulance. Cross was pacing the wet blacktop, searching for something: "I have to find it! I have to find it!" Two more EMT's were trying to pull Cross out of the road, informing him they had to check him over.

A woman laid dead on the blacktop in front of the Red Honda. Glass surrounded her. Obviously she'd went through the windshield. A fireman covered the woman with a sheet. Standing beside her was her husband. Bruised, battered, bloodied, Sheriff Lewis kept his emotions intact, and his eyes on Hamilton Cross, Tom, and Holly.

He vowed he'd get even.

23

Deputy Fugg just happened to be in the Crown Café on Lowman Street. Nothing strange about that except it was eleven thirty at night and the Café was supposed to be closed. He walked up to the door, placed a key in the door knob, and jiggled it twice. Fugg looked behind him and pushed the door open when he realized the coast was clear. The lights came on with the flick of Fugg's fingers on the light switch to his left.

Fugg dropped the key back in his pants pocket. He punched a few buttons on the alarm, went to the cold case and took a twelve ounce can of Dr. Pepper. Then headed to the counter and sat clumsily on a stool. He sipped from the can of soda and had moments of lonely thoughts. Maybe he was thinking of life choices, maybe he was thinking of a lost loved one, or the girl who got away.

Maybe he was sorry for what he's done.

We watched him from Jeanie's car.

We shadowed Fugg all day. Jeanie drove Mungo and me around, following him all over Augustus. Daily chores such as getting breakfast at the Hardees, sweet talking Cheryl Thomas at the thrift store. Taking care of mundane situations such as helping the Osmonds round up geese who just might fall in a sinkhole, or taking old lady Herring her daily mail.

"Wish me luck," I said, started to open the car door.

Jeanie puta hand on mine. "Hold on," she said. "Just… think about this. Okay, Evelina?"

"What's there to think about? I cast the spell. He tells me everything he knows."

"Which might not be much," Mungo chimed in.

"The two of you don't trust me. I see now. Of course a good track record…"

"That's not it," Jeanie said. "We're concerned for your safety."

"Thanks. I'll be fine," I told them. "I'm pretty sure Fugg is a pussycat."

"We'll follow you then." Jeanie was decisive.

"Okay. I'm just going to ask some Q's and he's going to answer them. I'll be fine, I said.

"I think you'll have to come up with another plan," mungo said. He pointed straight ahead. Sheriff Lewis pulled into a parking space next to Fugg's car.

Lewis got out of the car, stood beside it. He was watching Fugg as well as looking around to make sure the coast was clear. He walked over to the rider's side and opened the door. He reached inside and helped a woman in a pink dress with a blue scarf wrapped around her face. Lewis led her by the hand to the Café's entrance. She walked somewhat slowly, almost like it was painful to move.

Lewis ushered the woman inside. He let go of her hand for a second to close the door. Fugg greeted them happily. The woman suddenly attacked Fugg. Her scarf came unwrapped, eventually fell to the floor, revealing a horrific face. A face of a rotting corpse, high cheek bones that had become hollow and uneven sharpened teeth. Yellow eyes bulging from a grey dense face with loose thin skin.

She grabbed Fugg by the throat and began to squeeze. Fugg tried to remove her hands but quickly gave up. Lewis intervened at the moment Fugg was about to lose consciousness. Lewis was able to separate the woman and Fugg. Lewis chastised the woman and she opened her nearly disjointed jaw to scream at him. He turned to his Deputy and touched his shoulders, possibly asked if he was alright. Fugg nodded as he tried to collect himself and loss of breath.

"Jeanie?"

"Yeah?"

"I thought you said Maude Lewis died in a car wreck." I kept eyes on the situation unfolding inside the café.

"She did," Jeanie said. "I was the only reporter on the scene. Funny thing is… three months before that, Maude was drunk and hit Tom's car. They were in the middle of a court dispute when Tom hit Lewis' car. Tom dropped the lawsuit after this car wreck." Jeanie's eyes lit up. A flicker of an ember burned bright before it passed. She gasped. "Wait…" She paused and smacked the steering wheel. "Holy shit," Jeanie said calmly. "I remember now. There was a man searching for something at the accident. He'd been in the car and was hurt, but not badly. Still, the EMT's were trying to get him out of the road. They wanted to look him over. He kept refusing. Finally, he ran off in the woods."

"Oaky. So what?" I asked. Where the hell was Jeanie going with this story?

"I thought I recognized him. I told you so. Remember?"

"No," I was getting impatient with her and a little upset I missed my chance to interrogate Deputy Fugg.

"Hamilton Cross. He'd been in the car with the man and woman who hit Sheriff Lewis' car."

"Hamilton Cross?"

"Yes. I told you I'd seen him before," Jeanie said.

"Why was he in the car with the couple?" Mungo asked. "Better yet…what was he looking for?"

"Good question," I said. "Do you remember who the couple was, Jeanie?"

"Let me look."

"On your phone? You have a number?"

"No, Evelina. I saved my articles for the paper on Box. But I also saved my notes on my phone. Get with the

times, will you?"

"We don't need modern equipment. Do we, Mungo?"

"I would like to watch Netflix," Mungo said.

"You have a VCR," I told him. "You don't need anything else."

Jeanie sighed. "You can use my password for Netflix, Mungo. Jesus. Right now is not the time to argue about this. Got it. Tom and Holly Ramsey…" She stopped talking when two shadowy figures appeared on the street corner next to the café. "Hold the phone. Who the fuck is this?"

I drew in a sharp breath. The street light caught part of their faces. "That's the two guys who chased Joe Dancer and me."

I heard the car door open and saw Mungo was ready to leave the car.

"No, Mungo," I told him. "Now is not the time."

He shut the car door, readjusted himself in the backseat. He was disappointed. But I couldn't risk something bad happening to him again. These two guys were dangerous. Joe and I were lucky we got away. Plus, I wanted to see what was going to happen…

"Hey… they're going into the café…" I said.

"Holy shit, Evelina," Jeanie glanced at me, then back at the café. "They are connected to all of this. Lewis, Fugg, Maude Lewis… Joe Dancer… Hamilton Cross…"

The two men, one short, one tall, entered the café and it seemed the mood changed. Sheriff Lewis was no longer in control. Still, Lewis had to keep his aggressive dead wife at bay. She clawed at the short man and he backed away. The tall man waved his hand and Lewis' wife went limp, fell to the floor.

"What the hell?" Jeanie gasped. "'I'm keeping her alive! Remember that!' The tall man just said that. I read his

lips."

"Can you read more?" I asked her.

"No… Sorry," Jeanie said.

I have a feeling there's more to this meeting than just Fugg having a Dr. Pepper," I said. "I wish we could hear what they're saying."

Suddenly, the café went dark. We watched intently. There was no movement of any kind inside. The lights came back on and Sheriff Lewis and Deputy Fugg were the only ones left. The two men and Maude Lewis were gone.

24

Six months later:

Tom heard the thumping first.

He stirred from an already disturbing dream, sat up in bed and listened. Thump. Thump. Thump. Tom gasped. He felt his heart rise up in his throat and his hands began to shake.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"Oh, God," he whispered.

Holly was lying beside him, sound asleep, as she always did, after sex. She always came home from the realty office, tired, stressed out, and her feet aching from those horrible heels that her boss Lorraine demanded she wear, because; quote-unquote: "You have the best legs out of all of us except Robert."

Tom would get home first, from his woodwork shop only a mile from the house they've just moved into. He would start supper, have Holly's drink ready as soon as she walked through the front door. She would have two more Scotch and soda's and then force Tom to have kitchen sex. They would eat, watch a little TV, and go to bed. Tom and Holly would have to have sex again, then fall asleep. Tom would lie there for an hour or so, wondering why he'd become the less dominate mate when it was Holly who was the one being chased, caught and had doubts about marriage.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Tom heard it again. He touched Holly's shoulder with a nervous hand. She stirred and softly moaned, "No, Tom. Not again. I'm sore as it is and I have to get up early for a meeting at the office." Quickly, she fell asleep again, drowning out those wretched tree frogs with her ear-piercing

snoring.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Tom gulped, pulled the covers over his eyes. He prayed that the burglar, devil, menacingly rabid squirrel… or whoever it was… did not kill him first without letting him plead his case to stay among the living. He reached toward holly's shoulder once more and shook her violently.

"What?!" She screamed, rose from her pillows, fire shooting from her flared nostrils.

"I hear something," Tom said weakly.

"Go to **SLEEP**!" Holly angrily fluffed her pillows.

"But," Tom croaked in a slight whisper. "I heard a noise."

"**SLEEP**!" She grunted.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Holly rose from her pillows, blinked a few times. "What was that?" She asked.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you." Tom uncovered his face. "There's a noise coming from downstairs."

"Someone's in the house." Holly slid her legs over the side of the bed and stepped into her slippers. She fixed her nightgown so her ass wasn't hanging out and found Tom's robe, and threw it on, tied the strings tightly around her midsection.

"What are you doing?" A lump in his throat interrupted him as had to repeat the question twice.

"I'm going down there to see what is making that noise. You're going with me." Holly bent down and retrieved an aluminum baseball bat that had several strips of duct tape covering the top and bottom. Tom swallowed hard, nearly crawled up the bed's headboard.

"What? Oh, I don't know if we should, Holly," Tom said.

Holly was wearing that wide, frightening grin on her face coupled with strained enlarged eyes. This was the expression that always came whenever Holly became excited and during sex, tom would always have to look away. It was always in the back of Tom's mind that one day Holly was going to lose it and he would be held responsible for her action. He prayed that night was not the time or place.

"Come on, Tom." Holly swung the bat wildly, salivating at the chance for some action. "Let's get 'em!" She growled. Tom ran across the bed and followed Holly into the hallway. She looked back at him, lowered the bat. "Where is your weapon?" She whispered.

"Holly." Tom clucked his tongue. "You know I am a pacifist."

"God." she rolled her eyes. "You are useless."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

They exchanged alarmed gazes.

"What… what was that?" Tom tried to swallow the lump in his throat but he kept getting choked.

"I - I don't know," Holly gasped. She nervously pushed forward, raising the bat over her head, ready to strike. Tom clung to her as they tip - toed down the stairs. Tom fought back his exasperation which quickly turned into hyperventilation, which agitated Holly to no end. "Do you have to do that?" She asked in a low voice as they came to the bottom step. Tom flashed an apologetic smile and shrugged.

Holly stepped into the living room, swung the bat blindly. "Get the fuck outta here!" She screamed. Tom cowered on the last step, hid his face against the bannister. Holly was disappointed no one was there to receive her form of violence, but more disappointed Tom was not there to back her up. "Tom!" She stamped her feet. "Get over here! Stop being a coward!"

Tom sighed. "I'm not a coward." He rose slowly from the bottom step and walked even slowly toward Holly. "I'm being realistic."

"Oh?" She rebutted. "How so, Tom, dear?"

"Holly…if there was anyone inside the house, chances are they would have a gun. Which to that degree… they would shoot us… furthermore… darling, dear… they would kill us!"

"God… how did I end up with such a coward?" Holly punched Tom in the arm, which she did when she was annoyed at him.

"Ow!" Tom yelped, rubbed his right arm. "I'm not a coward! I'm a pragmatist."

"You will say anything to save face."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"Sounds like its coming from the den…" Tom said.

"Yeah," Holly concurred, nodded her head as if she were bobbing for apples. "Turn the light on."

"Oh, no." Tom backed away.

"Tom!" She said forcefully.

He sighed again, stepped to the hallway and flicked the switch. The light in the den hiccupped twice before illuminating the room. "I really need to get that fixed." Tom turned his obsessive attention to the light switch.

"Tom." Holly shoved Tom. "Take care of one situation at a time. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Tom nodded. "You're right," he whispered hoarsely.

The den was filled with pop culture memorabilia from decades past. An autographed photo of James Arness with his arm around Tom. A framed photo of Lynda Carter as Wonder woman. A signed football with names like Emmett Smith, Troy Aikman, Michael Irving, Joe Gibbs, and Cam Newton. Loads of paperback books from writers

such as Earl Stanley Gardner and Anne Rice, along with Tom's valuable comic book collection and baseball cards. Old movie posters from the 1930's to the current year.

There was an oak desk and leather chair behind it. A couch where Tom frequently sat to mull over his prized possessions and make online deals, either swapping or buying/and or selling. There was a 48 inch television mounted on the wall, usually stuck on Re-run channel.

Holly never liked going into the den. It represented all the money Tom had thrown away on junk, that in the end, no one really cares about. When they first started dating ten years ago, she thought it was cute he was collector. Holly would go to all the conventions, old TV shows, comic books, Science Fiction, sports… whatever it was… she would go with him. Tom was a person possessed and obsessed, knowledge that no one would even care to learn about subjects like who starred in what Star Trek episode in whatever year. This was the Tom she really did not care for, even had very little respect.

Holly entered the den swinging first. Tom covered his eyes and gasped at every swing.

"Get out of our house, motherfucker!" Holly screamed. "Tom, stop it."

"I can't help it," he said, uncovering his eyes. "I just know you will destroy all that I have worked so hard for."

"Oh, shut up! You're lucky I don't destroy you." Holly prodded Tom in the ribs with the bat.

As soon as Tom danced away from the baseball bat, a puddle of blood formed on the carpet. Holly dropped the bat and slowly stepped away from the bloodstain. Tom squealed and ran behind his desk, nearly tripping in the process.

"Where-where did that come from?!" Tom shrieked.

"I don't know." Holly came back to the bloodstain,

bent down to investigate. She placed a finger in it and found it had already dried. Tom was frantic.

"Don't touch it!" He shrieked again. "It might be evidence!"

"Listen to yourself, will ya?" Holly scoffed. "A bloodstain magically appears on our carpet and you think its evidence… for what? Those silly ghost programs on TV?"

"Hey," Tom started. What Holly said got him pondering something. "You're onto something, Holly," he shook his finger at her, and paced a bit.

"You think this a haunting? God, Tom… you are pathetic."

Tom drew in two quick breaths and gradually exhaled. "I don't think so, Holly." He quivered. "I know so." With that statement, Tom screamed and ran out of the den, waving his arms above his head.

"He's right, you know." A man said. He wore cargo-shorts and a T-shirt that said 'Go ahead' underneath an image of a woman's lips wrapped around a cartoon characters head. "This is a haunting."

Holly screamed, ran out of the den, waving her arms above her head.

25

I woke up suddenly.

I looked at the clock and saw it was one forty-five a.m. I heard Rajah growling. I rose from my bed slowly. Suddenly there was a scuffle in my office and Rajah barking loudly at the kitchen backdoor. I threw on my robe and ran out of my bedroom. I saw two shadows slugging it out.

"Where the hell did you come from?" A frightened woman's voice came from my backdoor.

I turned the light on and saw Mungo furiously beating a large man in a black suit. The man in the black suit recovered just enough to grab Mungo and toss him on my desk. Papers and books went flying to the floor. The man tried to leap on top of Mungo, but he rolled out of the way and the man hit his head on the corner of my desk, puncturing his left temple. Blood drained from the gash and covered the man's eyes. Dazed, the man tried to throw several punches, all missing Mungo. The man staggered to a chair and decided to sit.

"Hey! Stop this!" I screamed.

Still, that annoying woman was doing some screaming of her own. Mungo had the problem in my office taken care of. So I trotted in the kitchen and saw Rajah had Rev. Fulbright cornered at the open backdoor.

She looked at me and snarled, "Are you going to do something about this Hellhound?"

"What in the hell are you doing here?" I said.

"Call this thing off!" Rev. Fulbright demanded.

I waved my hand and Rajah disappeared, but not without a whimper. Earlier I could tell he wanted some action. He was pacing the living room while I watched

Charles Bronson and James Coburn yell and argue with each other in an otherwise very good film. I know Mungo was enjoying it, especially when the fight scenes came along. Rajah was antsy. Now I know why. He sensed someone was outside the shop, watching the building.

"Thank you," Rev. Fulbright said. "May I come inside?"

"You might as well," I told her. "Your bodyguard is already acquainted with Mungo."

Fulbright swished her hips and the skirt that clung tightly around those hips and legs sounded like two crickets doing a duet. The open toe heels she wore clicked upon the floor like a madman using Morris code to type out his play. She stood in front of her bodyguard, jabbed her thumb toward the backdoor. The man picked himself and shuffled off quickly, closing the door behind him.

Fulbright sat in the chair clients usually sit in and crossed her legs. Mungo groaned. I wasn't sure if he was turned on by Rev. Fulbright's action or concerned. He removed himself from behind my desk and set up at the office door. Reluctantly I perched behind the desk. For some reason this made sense, and it felt more professional to everyone.

"Okay," I said and let a yawn escape. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

She said nothing. She reached into her red handbag and took out a book, tossed it on my desk. It was a travelogue of Virginia towns and cities.

"So what?" I told her. "A book of maps."

"Not just maps," Fulbright snapped. "It's got fucking love letters in it as well!"

Ooooo… such language for a Reverend to use.

"So what?" I said again.

"Open the goddamned book. Sheesh. All of you

people your age are so fucking lazy. Just like my kids. You'll find something interesting."

I thumbed through it. "Oh wow. Nice pics of Charlottesville in the fall. Very pretty."

"You are a fucking nuisance!" She tore the book from my hands. I glanced up at Mungo. He was itching to throw her out.

"How do you mean, Reverend?" I said, closing the book.

"You brought those two into my life!" She jabbed a finger at me.

"Which two?"

"Simon Abaddon and his midget!"

"I believe the P.C. term is little person," I told her.

"I don't care," Rev. Fulbright hissed. "You brought them back into my life."

"You remember that? Back at the college?"

Fulbright nodded. She had a pained look on her face. "He's my uncle."

"The midget?"

"Ha, ha," she snarled. "No. Abaddon."

"Is that your real name?"

"Of course not. You already know my real name."

"God," I sighed. "Do any of you people keep your real name? Why are you giving me this book of map… wait… I'm a little slow. Hollowpoint is in here?" I began to thumb through the book.

"Of course not." Fulbright rolled her eyes. "You're playing with me."

I bit my lower lip, shut the book again. "Mmm. You found me out."

"Look in the back of the book. You'll find some letters. Those letters have clues you might need."

"Just read the damn letters." Fulbright uncrossed her

legs, then re-crossed them.

"I'm not even sure who's who at this point…"

"It doesn't matter." she looked away, ran hand across her chin. "Bobby Gorman is my son."

"His name sure does come up a lot."

"You already knew that?"

I shrugged. "Research. Very naughty boy."

"Yes. Very. Cost him his life. I've got two things to tell you." Fulbright stood. She leaned across the desk. I got a close up of those flared nostrils. "Whoever buried my son's body is the one you should be weary of."

"Okay," I said. "What's the second thing?"

"The men in my family are liars." With that she motioned for her tired and beaten bodyguard to follow her. They went out the backdoor, an invisible Rajah growled at them. The door slammed hard behind them.

I glanced at Mungo. "What the hell did that mean? 'The men in my family are liars'?" I shook my head. Mungo shrugged. "Jesus. She broke into my house just to tell me that?"

***

Jourdan knew he should not have tried to take that child. Something came over him. He remembered an old man talking to him. He kept staring into the old man's eyes, the pupils would change from brown, to red, to black, to blue, to yellow, and back to brown. The old man spoke, but Jourdan didn't hear the voice, nor did he remember the words. Next thing Jourdan remembered him being pinned down by a growling dog and surrounded by cops

Life had not been easy for Jourdan since Holly fired him. One day he decided he wanted to surprise her. They had this little game where she was unhappy with his work

and she made him undress and have sex with her in her office. Well, the day he decided to arrive at the office early, take all of his clothes off and surprise her in her office, was also the day she brought the Regional manager in to discuss Jourdan's promotion.

At first, sitting in Sherriff Lewis' jail cell, he thought it was funny. Then he realized where his life had gone since the firing, the many odd jobs and very little he'd made as a dishwasher and having to move out of his house into a one bedroom low-rent apartment, losing all of that and finally squatting in a condemned shack in the woods, Jourdan wept hard.

He heard the door open. Deputy Fugg said he'd go out for sandwiches. No way would he be back so soon. He smelled Thyme and death. He heard heavy boots on the linoleum floor. Jourdan hovered in a corner of his cot. He pulled the blanket around him. He couldn't figure if he was shivering because he was cold or because he was afraid.

"Deputy Fugg?" Jourdan called out.

No one answered. So he tried again.

"Deputy Fugg? Is that you?"

Still, no answer.

A tall shadow loomed over Jourdan. A key slid into the lock of the cell and a hand turned the key to the left. The door opened and a huge man stepped out of the shadow. Jourdan recognized him. The man was there in the woods where Jourdan tried to abduct the little girl.

Gunnari Boldo was the little girl's father.

Fear took hold of Jourdan and wouldn't let go. He opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

26

That mythical town buried in the mountainside after a flood in the nineteen thirties called Hollowpoint, remained a mystery to Jeanie and I. We couldn't find it on any map, but we found letters in the book Reverend Fulbright gave me. We were in a back corner of the Augustus University library. The letters were tucked away in a book of maps detailing towns of Virginia that had disappeared. Strangely, that book had no information about Hollowpoint.

One letter read like this:

My dearest, Maggie. I have a confession. I am to blame for the flood and the disappearance of our home. I am the reason for our friends, neighbors and families lost their lives. At least I saved you and our children from the flood. But my guilt cannot be shared, nor could you or the children soothe this burden. That is why I have taken you to my brother Conny in Augustus. Although I reject our family's ways, I think he is the best person to take care of you.

We need money badly. I don't think I have to tell you that. I went to see my brother. I remembered he had an object that I thought was worth quite a bit of money. I stole it. I made my way back to Hollowpoint to retrieve you and the children. I sent all of you to stay with Conny. I headed back to Hollowpoint to get our possessions and planned to move us out west after I sold the item.

I had no idea what horror I had unleashed on the people and land of Hollowpoint. I am bitterly upset with myself. I am truly sorry for what I have done. I am sorry I cannot rejoin our family.

I love you Maggie.

…Darvish Barabbas.

"Conny's brother," I said.

"No," Jeanie said. "I think this is Conny's father. The flood happened in nineteen thirty-two. Conny was named after an uncle."

"You can use magic to stay alive well into your hundreds."

"I suppose so… you'd know that," Jeanie conceded.

I had a thought. "So… Maggie is…?"

Jeanie took out her phone. She typed in a name into a search engine. She scoffed. "Yep," she said. She held the phone in front of me, showed me the search engine's results.

Many names were used before becoming Reverend Fulbright.

"Was she giving us clues to who she was?" Jeanie asked.

"No… it was a spell. That much we know. Someone was trying to give us clues." Exasperated I slapped the table. "Hold on. No. She'd be too young. Damn it!" A librarian walking by gave me a dirty look. I just smiled at her.

"I'm getting a headache," Jeanie declared.

"Uggg… me too," I said. "I wonder… If… Rev. Fulbright took the name Maggie Barabbas. She was one of the children."

Jeanie shrugged. "Maybe," she sighed. "I don't know. And that damn white deer keeps popping up. What the hell is with that?"

I looked at Jeanie and laughed. "I think I know who Darvish is."

"Yeah, well, we still don't know where Hollowpoint is, or how Bobby Gorman's body got there."

"Darvish knows the answer to both questions." I said. "Let's go see Gilley Rolf."

27

No matter where they went, the apparition followed them. He finally cornered Tom and Holly in their bedroom. They were in their bed, the sheets and covers pulled snuggly over their heads. The apparition hovered over them before deciding to lower himself to their level and sit on the side of the bed.

The apparition had definitely been the surfer/jock type. At least from first glance, that was Tom's assumption. The ghostly presence was still dressed in shorts and a cut-off t-shirt. He still retained his tan and a body that showed he worked out. Not necessarily Arnold Schwarzenegger, but a lean muscled body. He was barefoot, and oddly enough, Tom noticed when the apparition tried to walk, he purposely made sure his feet never touched the floor, and when it did, he seemed to be in some sort of pain or discomfort.

"I'm not going anywhere," the apparition said. "You're not going to get rid of me."

Holly uncovered herself, swallowed her fear momentarily, and asked, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'll tell you my name, if it helps you to relax around me," the apparition chuckled. "My name is Bobby Gorman. I need you two to do me a favor. You do this favor and I can make sure, in the afterlife as well as the present, you'll be taken care of. You want to go to heaven, I can arrange that. You want to haunt an enemy for all eternity… I can arrange that too."

Tom lowered the covers just enough to see Gorman. "What if we deny you this request?"

"I'll make your life miserable. Simple as that." Gorman said.

"What is it that you want? You never said what you wanted." Holly threw the covers off of her and sat up in a huff. "Just tell us what you want, damn it!"

Gorman chuckled. "I like her," he said to Tom. "She's a spitfire."

"You don't know half of what I go through," Tom said. Gorman laughed, slapped his knee. Holly sent Tom a shocked look, then fuming she whacked him on the shoulder.

"I love this," Gorman laughed again. "Much better than any vaudeville in the after-life," he continued guffawing, showed a toothy grin afterwards.

"Just tell us what to you need us to do so we can get rid of you!" Holly demanded, her voice shrill.

"There's a grave I want you to dig up," Gorman said nonchalantly.

"Oh no," Tom protested. "I distinctly remember placing in my prenuptial that there would be no grave digging."

Holly smiled at Tom. That was one thing she admired about him, was his ability to lie on the spot. She took his hand in hers and gave a relieved sigh. That was the statement that could get us off the hook, she thought. "He's right. And you ghosts have to follow human laws."

"Where the fuck did you hear that?" Gorman said, a little annoyed.

"*Beetlejuice*, I believe. Wasn't it, honey?" Holly was now a lot less stressed and bitchy. More airy and light-hearted. These swings of the pendulum of her personality definitely kept Tom on edge most of the time. He didn't know what Holly would show up during the course of the day.

"We can just ignore him, Holly," Tom said, patting her on the hand he held.

"That's exactly what we'll do! No ghost is going to run our lives," Holly added.

"Let's get some sleep," Tom said. He snickered, kissed Holly's hand before hunkering down in the bed.

"Yes. Let's get our eight hours, honey." Holly snuggled up to Tom and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Gorman was furious. "You two are serious?" He looked at them incredulously. "No," he said, rising in the air and hovering over top of Holly and Tom. "No, no, no no. NO!"

"Did you hear something?" Tom asked, as he closed his eyes.

"No, honey." Holly yawned, closed her eyes. Groggy, she said, "I didn't hear anything. Go to sleep."

28

Jeanie and I went to see Gilley Rolf. Deputy Fugg was there. Standing near the door, looking like he wasn't sure why he was there.

"Heyyyy." he gave a nervous laugh. "You two following me?"

Jeanie and I exchanged puzzled looks.

"Why would we follow you?" Jeanie asked.

"Kind of strange you two show up here," Fugg said.

"So… why are you here?" I stepped forward through the threshold. Jeanie followed.

"Someone has been trying to get at Mr. Rolfe," Fugg put away his little notebook and placed the pen back in his shirt pocket.

"Get at him? Like a stalker?" Jeanie looked around the shop. There had definitely been a person or persons inside looking for something. The place was a mess.

"Possibly an old enemy," Rolfe spoke up. He was sitting at one of pianos that had been destroyed. A finger was fondling one of black keys barely hanging on to the keyboard. Rolfe stopped messing with it and lifted his heavy eyes toward us. "Yes," he said slowly. "Hard to believe I have any enemies."

"What are we then?" Ooops. That slipped out.

"Warring neighbors, it seems," Rolfe responded without missing a beat. "One thing I know about you, Miss Giles. You would never destroy anything a man loves."

Hmmm. He doesn't know me that well. The answer to that is depends on what the man had done to me. I'm not sure I like being scorned.

"Do you know who this person… Or persons who

have done this?" I presented the damage to everyone by waving my hand like a game show hostess.

"It's time I came clean, as people say," Rolf said.

Fugg stuck his chest out. In an instant he'd decided to play bad cop instead of confused cop. "Do tell, Mr. Rolf. Do tell."

"Wait…" Jeanie stepped in. "Mr. Rolf, what you are about to do may require guidance from legal counsel…"

"Will you knock it off, Jeanie?" Fugg bellowed. Suddenly he had a burst of confidence. He was starting to sound like Sheriff Lewis. "He doesn't need a lawyer…"

"Mr. Rolf, do not say anything else," Jeanie countered. "Deputy Fugg has no right to coerce you…"

"I'm not coercing anyone!" Fugg laughed and threw his hands up. "Mr. Rolf called me!"

"Will you two shut-up!" I screamed. I was sick of the bickering. To be honest, I wanted this whole ordeal to be over. "Let the man talk," I said when both of them became quiet. "Maybe… maybe he has something to say."

Now I've never liked Gilley Rolf. He was a mean spirited person and was always ready to turn a child away from his door that was collecting money to help the school. Yet he would give whatever money he had to televangelists. I know this because I have witnessed the scene and he has knocked on my door asking for donations for Joel Olsteen.

"Have you ever heard of Hollowpoint?" Rolf said.

Both Jeanie and I drew in short breaths. "Yes," Jeanie said in a shocked voice. "We were hoping you could tell us about Hollowpint."

"Are you Darvish Barrabas?" I asked.

The old man sighed. "I am."

"Whoa!" Fugg exclaimed. "You're kin to Conny Barabbas?"

Rolf nodded. "I am."

"You're a gypsy?" Fugg continued his idiotic questioning.

I smacked Fugg on the arm. He squealed. "Let him tell the story," I chastised him.

"Okay, okay." Fugg rubbed his arm.

"I am responsible for many deaths." Rolf spoke slowly, breathed irregularly during the time he spoke, moved his lips constantly, even when words did not leave the thin white lips. "I am also responsible for the destruction of Hollowpoint."

"Hollow-what?" Fugg asked and Jeanie I both shushed him. Fugg had a hurtful look on his face.

Rolf continued.

"I had stolen an object from my brother. This object was created during middle ages in Poland. I had no idea that if it was broken into four parts, destruction would follow. A flood came and destroyed Hollowpoint. The entire town. Everyone died except my wife and children." Rolf was suddenly thrown into deep thought. I imagined he was thinking not only of the past, but the regret of not seeing his children growing up. Tears streaked his cheeks. When he came back to reality, Rolf quickly wiped the tears away. "The protector of the object has been looking for me ever since. But parts of that object had not been in my possession for decades. Until now."

Rolf showed us the red crystal no bigger than a pebble. It lay in the palm of his wrinkled hand, pulsating.

"Where did you get that?" I asked Rolf.

"I found this in the hands of a dead homeless man," he said.

"Talking about Bovey," Jeanie said.

Fugg nodded. "Yeah. We found his remains behind the hedges on Augustus campus. Well, a student… a female student… just as Sheriff Lewis and I were…"

"Okay," I screamed at Fugg, held my hands up at him to help stop him from talking. "We get the picture." I turned to Rolf. "This protector of the object…"

"Objects…." Rolf corrected me.

"Objects - fine," I sputtered and rolled my eyes. "Is he a knight?"

"Yes," Rolf said faintly. "He is a Knights Templar."

Fugg laughed. We gave him a look and he eased that laugh into a cough.

"What does this Knight want?" Jeanie asked.

"This Ruby, of course," he answered.

"Just the Ruby?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I'd broken the object into five pieces. I wanted to sell them separately. I was advised by one broker to do such a thing. I sold the pieces to different people. I came back to Hollowpoint to collect my things so I could board a train to Atlanta. That was where I was going to sell the Ruby. I saw the Knight. He was coming for me. Behind him was the flood. One huge wave came at us. I awoke to the most gorgeous sunny day. Perfect weather. I tell you. But… I was the only one alive in Hollowpoint."

"How in the hell did you survive a flood?" Fugg chimed in. "Especially if you were in the eye of the storm?"

Rolf lifted his shoulders, dropped them slowly. "I don't know," he said, getting lost in the past again. "I've been trying to figure that out for years."

Suddenly the lights went out. A powerful wind came and knocked the three of us to the floor. I could tell Fugg was on top of me because I felt his gun driving into my right breast. I could smell jasmine perfume, so I knew Jeanie had fallen on top of Fugg. We struggled to unwrap each other from the human pretzel we'd formed. Finally I was able to push Fugg off of me and I heard him grunt as he slammed into some sort of furniture.

I heard shuffling, heavy footsteps and clinking metal. A car drove by and its headlights provided some light. The Knight had his sword raised high above his head. Rolf screamed just as the blade came down swiftly across his chest. He let out another blood curdling scream as the Knight dragged the blade down to Rolf's waist. The Knight did a three-sixty and the sword severed Rolf's head from his neck.

Jeanie and I screamed.

I fell backwards, my left thigh hitting something metal and I realized it was Rolf's nasty spittoon. A gooey liquid ran over my legs, matting my tights to my skin. Who in the hell still had spittoons this day and time? I felt a pebble or a rock roll over my leg. I clasped it tightly in my hand right before Jeanie grabbed my arm and started to drag me across the wooden floor of Rolf's Piano shop. Another hand took hold of the sleeve of my blouse. It started to rip at the cuff and form a huge hole at the wrist.

"Sorry," Fugg whined.

"Who cares!?" Jeanie told him. "Let's get out of here!"

29

"Are you Jeanie?" Tom called out to us. He practically sprinted from the entrance of his wood shop.

Jeanie stepped out of the car, said she was. Mungo and I got out too, and Tom was taken aback. He was intimidated by Mungo. I could tell. He kept looking at Mungo. His hands shook when he was introduced to us.

"I didn't realize reporters had entourages," Tom said.

"To be honest, they're mine," I said.

"Ah." He laughed nervously. "I see." He paused, rubbed the dark circles under his eyes. He hadn't been sleeping at all. Looking at him, I could tell. Maybe that's why he was acting a little odd. Lots of nervous ticks like rubbing the back of his ears, brushing his hair with a hand, or constantly licking his lips. "Funny. I was, uh, ready to call you."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "You know who I am?"

"Yeah… I think I know why you are here." He looked at Jeanie and said, "You didn't have to say you were doing a follow up story on those two accidents. All you had to say was you knew Evelina Giles. I would've let you guys in my house right away."

Tom led us into his workshop. It was musty smelling, drafty, and the tools and woodworking machines were all covered in blood. Jeanie gasped. She was immediately sick. She ran out of the shop and puked on the grass around the side of the building.

"What happened here, Tom?" I said, examining the room.

Tom let out a deep sigh. "A malicious spirit that won't leave Holly and I alone."

"Where's Holly?" Jeanie asked.

"Holly/" Tom glanced at his feet as he spoke. He shuffled them in an odd way, almost like he was dancing a two-step. He looked up at us, his eyebrows narrowed. There was a quiver in his voice. "She's at the house… locked in the bedroom, as she has been for the last two weeks."

"Something happen?" I asked.

"Yeah. Bobby Gorman happened."

"That name keeps popping up." Jeanie said.

"So does his ghost," Tom whispered.

"Did he do this?" I pointed at all the tools covered in purple crimson.

"Yes… well… not exactly… I mean… physically… no. But… with his guiding hand," Tom said. "Holly did it."

"She used this, I assume." Mungo held up an ordinary butcher knife everyone keeps in their kitchen. The blade was fat and curved, twelve inches in length. The black handle was short with ridges and silver beads. Blood drops were caked on the blade.

"Whose blood is that, Tom?" I had to ask, not really sure if I wanted to know who it was.

"If you must know…" He gestured for us to follow. He went toward a utility closet. "You sure you're ready for this…?"

No one answered. We were all watching the door of the utility closet intently. Tom shrugged. He gave us all another chance to say don't open the door. But he didn't get that kind of response. He turned the doorknob slowly. Anxiety coupled with anticipation filled the room.

It happened so fast I couldn't tell who it was at first.

The door came open and the body fell out. No gasps, no elation, no sighs, no cries, from anyone. Bloodied, broken, multiple stab wounds were visible on the head, hands, and chest. The man was in his sixties and wearing a

hybrid of fashion from different decades. Mungo stepped forward and turned the body over.

It was Hopper.

That look in his eyes. That look of surprise, utter fear. He had no idea he was going to be stabbed to death. You could see it on his face.

"Damn it, Hopper," I said. "What have you got yourself into?"

"He has a medallion around his neck," Mungo said.

The medallion was gold-plated, and had a large engraved eye in the middle of a leaf.

"Ohhhh boy," I said.

"What's wrong?" Jeanie asked.

"The Eye of Kalpesh," I said. "That's what's wrong."

"Just a charm." Jeanie leaned it to get a closer look. "A protection Gypsies use. At least from what I've read."

"Hate to break it to you, Jeanie, but the Eye of Kalpesh is not used for protection. You've been reading the myth," I told her.

"So enlighten us, damn it!" Jeanie screamed, exasperated.

"The eye of Kalpesh is like the all seeing eye a lot of secret societies use as their symbols. None of them actually work… at least not without a little magic involved. Kalpesh was a Teutonic Knight in Prussia in 1270. He was made all mighty protector of the Order. The Battle of Pagastin was fought between the Teutonic Knights and Pagan Prussians in 1271 during the Great Prussian Uprising (1260–1274). Pagan Prussians rose against their conquerors, who tried to convert them to Christianity, after Lithuanians and Samogitians soundly defeated the joint forces of the Teutonic Knights and the Livonian Order in the Battle of Durbe in 1260. The first years of the uprising were successful to Prussians, but the Knights received reinforcements from

Western Europe and were gaining upper hand in the conflict.

"His right eye was taken from his dead body and sealed in thirteen medallions and handed to other Knights. With prayer, using the secret names of God, the eye engraved into the medallions has sight given to its user. Keeping watch over the person wearing it. In the case of the Knights, sight was given to a high priest, who would cast spells to protect the knight in battles.

"At some point, the Pagan Prussians got a hold of the only medallion to survive. It's been handed down by generations. They started using it not to protect, but spy on villages they would raid. As opposed to protecting those Knights from harm."

"Didn't work for Hopper," Mungo said.

"Yeah, but there's another charm that diffuses, or blinds the Kalpesh eye," I said.

"Or part of it," Tom said.

"You know about that charm?" I asked.

"I have to," he answered. "It's only drilled my head everyday by the ghost of Bobby Gorman."

"What did you mean 'part of it'?" Jeanie said. She walked over to Mungo and stared at the motionless body of Hopper. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Here was a man that the three of us had known most of our lives. Mungo found a piece of tarp and covered Hopper. I hugged Jeanie. She may have hated Hopper but she still didn't want to see the man dead.

"The charm Evelina is talking about was shattered in pieces at the car accident," Tom said. "The Eve Hollow is what it's supposedly called. That's all know," Tom moved his bony shoulders up and down in a lazy shrug. "I don't know anything about charms except Lucky Charms." Tom smiled faintly, but went back a frown when he saw no one was amused by his little joke.

"We need to speak to your wife, Mr. Ramsey," Jeanie said. "We'd like to get her account of things."

"Are you going to call the police?" Tom asked.

"Yes… but… " I looked at Mungo. He looked at me, disapprovingly.

"I will take the body and place it in behind the Crown café," Mungo said.

"Jeanie will call Fugg," I said.

"What?" Jeanie sputtered as she turned to me. "Why do I have to do it?"

"Your voice is more pleasant," I said.

"No. You're just pushing this on to me…"

"I'll do it…" Tom interjected. "My wife, my problem, my fucking ghost."

"Wait," I said. "Mungo, don't take him to the Crown café." I closed my eyes and said a one sentence prayer. Nothing big, nothing too small. Just hoping someone hears it, and will take care of Hopper in the other life. I reopened my eyes and sighed. "Give Jeanie and me a few minutes to talk to Mrs. Ramsey. We'll take Hopper to see Conny Barabbas. He deserves a Gypsy burial. They should be able to right things for Hopper in the afterlife."

30

Six years ago:

"For free?" Della asked, still watching the pewter man and woman kiss and return to holding each other under the umbrella, as if they were on a tape loop.

"Ohhhh… well… there's always a price to pay… but…" Simon shrugged, placed the pewter statuette back in his coat. "I can just be on my way and offer it to someone else…"

"No!" Della reached for it and Simon pulled away, chuckling deviously. She froze for a second before recoiling slowly.

"Please… something… something about that statue… I need it… I don't know why… but for some reason… " she whispered.

"Sid," Simon said.

"Yes, boss," the small man answered.

"Show the lady what she has to do to receive this wonderful gift."

"Sure thing, boss." Sid removed .38 snub nose from his belt and carefully placed it in the silver haired lady's hands, folded them over the gun and gently stroked her fingers. "Here ya go lady,"

"What's this for?" Della asked, slightly confused, slightly knowing the answer.

Simon chuckled. He nodded his head and pointed to the old man watching television and taking a long drag on his cigarette, turned to look at the old woman eating oatmeal and reading the newspaper.

"I… I don't know if… I can…" The silver haired woman said, her big brown eyes glared at the gun in her

hand.

Simon showed her his broad smile and offered up the statuette.

A few minutes later, the neighborhood could hear four gun shots, and all through that spring they could watch the silver haired lady in the news standing trial for the murder of her elderly parents.

31

Six months ago:

For two weeks, Holly and Tom didn't see, hear, nor feel Gorman's presence. For two weeks, no signs of any paranormal activity intruded upon their lives. For two weeks, they completely believed they had invented a way to deal with nonsensical supernatural events. Just ignore them. Don't believe in miracles, magic, or burning bushes.

Coincidences is truth. Science prevails every time.

They were wrong.

Sheriff Lewis came into Tom's shop, hung around the counter a few minutes before Tom noticed him. Tom was in the back sawing some planks for a rocking chair the Phillips had ordered. Every Christmas, the Phillips order custom made furniture from Tom to give to their family members. That year their daughter was expecting her first child, so they ordered a rocking-chair and crib.

Tom came out of the workshop and into the storefront. "Sheriff." He gave Lewis a lacklustre greeting. "What can I do for you?"

"Tom." Lewis picked a cashew from a tooth and spat on the floor. "Sorry. I had Kung Pow for lunch. Something always gets caught in my teeth."

"Yeah," Tom said, disinterested. "What's up, Sheriff?"

"That situation a few months ago, Tom," Lewis said. He sniffed the air, removed his sunglasses. "I'm here to ask as a friend, Tom. Can't we resolve this without the courts getting involved? Maude is just sick about the whole thing."

"Sheriff," Tom began, walked over to the counter where Lewis stood. "Maude was drunk when she hit my car.

I suffered a broken wrist because of her reckless driving. I could barely make any furniture because of that injury. There seems to be nothing I can do as far as the law handing out punishment. She got a slap on the wrist for slamming into me. Besides, my lawyer says not to talk about the case with anyone."

"David Frank is everyone's lawyer around here, Tom. I've known him since we were in the first grade. You might want to switch lawyers, get one from Big Rock city."

"Sheriff, I don't want to be rude… but," Tom sighed. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Tom," Lewis chuckled. "We're just talking…"

"Sheriff," Tom interrupted Lewis with some force. "Leave my shop RIGHT now."

"Okay." Tom placed his sunglasses back on his face slowly, carefully, gazing at Tom to make his point. "Make sure you drive the speed limit from now on, Tom. I wouldn't want to hand out any tickets to you or Holly because of any reckless driving."

32

Bobby Gorman sat in the living room of Millionaire Robert Dallas, sipping his brandy, admiring Edouard Mamet's 'Surprised Nymph' on the wall. Dallas stood by his fireplace, studying the painting as his long, crooked fingers barely held the goblet. He glanced back at Gorman, took a sip of brandy and smiled wantonly at the young man in a striped beach shirt and cargo shorts.

"You are an admirer of great art then, Mr. Gorman?" Dallas asked, noticing that Gorman had wonderfully muscled calves.

"I can tolerate it," Gorman said.

"This particular beauty always stirs something inside me." Dallas smiled sheepishly.

"Is that a fact?" Gorman cleared his throat, tried to stay in character. He was starting to feel slightly uncomfortable with the old man eyeing him, undressing him, staring at him when his back was turned. "I hope you aren't having buyer's remorse, Mr. Dallas? I realize I don't know much about… art, but I do know when I have something valuable."

"Oh, no, no… I have looked this painting up and down… I don't see anything wrong with it." Dallas finished off his brandy, and felt a little bit high. "You say you… found this at your family's yard sale?" Dallas took a few steps to Gorman offered some more brandy.

"Yes." Gorman waved his hand denying the old man a chance to refill his glass. "I was helping my Aunt with some boxes from the attic. That's when I found this little jewel. I bounced it around a lot of buyers."

"They were not interested?"

"Oh," Gorman chuckled, shrugged in that boyish-charm he happened to have in buckets. He batted his long lashes at Dallas. "None of them intrigued me as much as you, Mr. Dallas."

Dallas scoffed and wagged a finger at Gorman. "I've told you before. Call me Robert… and… if we become greater friends… you may call me Bobby," Dallas flirted.

"Maybe we will become greater friends." Gorman smiled, rose from his chair and faced Dallas.

Robert Dallas reached out and took Gorman's hand without moving. Gorman stepped closer, leaned in to receive a kiss. Instead he heard a horrible wet, sinking sound, and saw Robert Dallas's eyes become glassy… looking past Gorman. Then Gorman saw the blood trickle from Robert Dallas's forehead and the Ice pick protruding from top of his head. Gorman squealed, threw his hands over his mouth. He ran a few inches to the left as Robert Dallas fell straight ahead.

Joan was now visible. She'd been behind Dallas the whole time and she'd plummeted that ice pick into Dallas's head. She was not pleased with Gorman nor the fact he was willing to kiss that old man, and the expression on her face showed her discontent. But without missing a beat, Joan was all business.

"I found his safe," Joan stated. "I took this." She held up the small, round piece of glass, with a rose painted on it. It looked like a piece of stained glass from the window of a church. Joan couldn't keep her eyes from it until Bobby Gorman said this:

"Joan… you killed him!" Bobby screamed. He was more upset than Joan expected. "That was not the plan! I was supposed to…"

"Fuck him? Yeah… I know… you and the gay rich guy go to bed and I steal money from his safe… I don't really

like it when you do that Bobby…"

"Damn it to hell, Joan! Now we have a murder on our hands!"

"I don't know what it is, but I saw it glowing when I opened his safe. For some reason… I had to have it."

Bobby grabbed Joan by the hand and practically dragged her out of Robert Dallas' house.

Robert Dallas laid motionless, in front of the raging fire in the fireplace, bleeding out on the carpet he spent thousands of dollars on.

33

Holly was not happy with Jordan's work. That was why she made him take off all of his clothes and work in the nude. She loved making her secretary miserable. Good thing no one else worked in the office, or else they would see the twenty eight year old blonde Frenchman's bird-chest and his unkempt bush around his genitals. Not one hair on his pale body except down yonder. A huge wiry, red bush.

Holly always got a kick out of seeing it. Sometimes she could barely contain her laughter, that day she was in a different mood and need badly to make sure others were beneath her. That day could have been worse Jordan. The week before Holly made him wipe her after urinating. Not just once, but all day. Last month, she made Jordan masturbate in front of her.

Why did Jordan do these things? Why didn't he just quit the job? Because Jordan had fallen in love with his boss, and he was strongly attracted to anyone who held power over him. He actually loved being humiliated. Whenever he showed up for work and Holly treated him correctly, Jordan was not only disappointed, he was also very depressed and questioned whether she liked him.

They didn't get many visitors in the office on Wednesdays. Sheriff Lewis walked in during a memo session. Luckily, Jordan had time to sneak into the bathroom and get dressed. He was a little heartbroken that he didn't get his spanking that usually followed taking a memo.

Holly found the sheriff snooping around Jordan's desk. "What can I do for you Sheriff?"

He jumped, gave an embarrassing smile. "Where's Jordan?"

"He's in disposed." Holly walked over to the Sheriff, her heels click-clacking on the tile floor.

"Ah… does the others have today off? The other real-estate agents?"

"They come to the office twice a week and my boss comes in once a month. What's with the questions, Sheriff Lewis?"

"I was just at Tom's." Lewis cleared his throat. "He doesn't want to settle."

"That's a shame, Sheriff." Holly folded her arms and cast an indignant glare at Lewis.

"That's what I told Tom…"

"He's a grown man," Holly scoffed. "He can make his own decisions."

"Bullshit," Lewis laughed. "Tom doesn't even take piss without your say so, Holly. Everybody knows you wear the pants."

"Even if it were true, who gives a shit?"

"Look… I just came here hoping to convince you to convince Tom…"

"You know I won't do that."

They stared at each other for a second. The door to Holly's office creaked open and Jordan stepped out. "Um… should I go back to looking over those sales?"

"Why don't you take lunch, Jordan?" Holly said without taking her eyes off of Sheriff Lewis.

"I was just leaving." Sheriff ambled to the exit, placed a hand on the door knob. "Holly. Tell Tom to drive safe. My deputies are going to be looking for drunk drivers this weekend since the High school has their winter dance."

"I'll tell him."

"You make sure. Good seeing you. Have a nice lunch, Jordan," Lewis said as he went out the door.

"Is it just me," Jordan said. "Or was Sheriff Lewis

acting more intimating than usual."

"So what," Holly snarled. "Why are you still dressed, you little maggot!"

Jordan removed his sweater immediately, his heart soared.

34

"Where are we going to sell this?" Gorman asked.

Joan and Bobby Gorman were speeding down a lonely highway at two a.m., moonlight shining brightly on a dented Datsun truck they just stole from a from a two bit hotel.

"Something tells me we can't," Joan said. "We got twenty thousand from the old man. We'll live off that for a good while."

"We need somewhere to hide out," Bobby said.

"We're not going to see that dumbass," Joan said.

"Who?"

"Your friend. Hamilton," she said.

"Stop being jealous, Joan," Bobby said. He glanced from the road to her, and then back to the road.

"I'm not jealous, Bobby."

"Oh? Then why'd you kill Robert Dallas?"

"I don't know!" Joan slapped the dashboard. She looked out the car window. She focused on the blurry trees the car passed by.

"You knew the plan. Sometimes… sometimes you have to do certain things…"

"Disgusting what you were going to do, Bobby!"

"…To get what you want, Joan," Bobby said. "Besides… what is between Hamilton and me… that part of our relationship is over with. It was over with after we did our time. We're… just friends. Anyway, he's with someone."

They were silent for a while. Both thinking they wish they had made different life choices. Bobby wishing he'd lived with his dad in Vermont and not his Mother in Indiana. He might have never fallen in with the wrong people. Gotten

into selling Meth and stealing… but that was not in the cards.

Joan wished she had listened to her Mother. Went to school every day, picked up her grades and made it into college, studied to be a teacher. She wished she had never met Bobby Gorman at her friend's house. She wished she hadn't slept with him that night and given her heart to him. She wished she was at home with her Mother.

"I'm getting tired," Bobby said. "We need to stop at a hotel."

They pulled into a dank, musty motel in some forgettable small town, not far from Augustus. The motel was a small building that housed twelve small rooms and a front lobby, all one floor. It was nasty, dusty, and played hell with Joan's allergies. She started sneezing as soon as they hit the front door.

Bobby gave her a mean look as if to say: "cut it out, Joan. Your being a snob". Of course, he didn't have the energy to start another fight. He took Joan by the hand and gently urged her toward the front desk. A large woman with no neck sat on stool barely able to hold her weight. A fan was on high and blew her blond strands all over her face. The woman tried to smile, instead she curled her top lip as she kept removing the strands from her very round, red face.

"Can I help you?" The woman's voice sounded like Charles Bronson.

That scared Bobby a little. He wondered if the woman had a .44 behind her desk, her fat fingers fondling the handle like she was touching a man's penis. No, Bobby thought. Not everything is about guns, bad men, and sex. Wait, he thought again. Charles Bronson didn't carry a .44. Clint Eastwood did. No matter. They were there to get a room, rest, maybe stay low for a while, not to talk movie trivia.

"Yes," Bobby said. "We'd like a room."

The woman leaned in. Her already lit cigarette, was hanging from her bottom lip. She smelled like beef bouillon, those little cubes that come in a round bottle and sit on the shelf in a grocery store forever, accumulating a horrendous stale smell, until opened to be, let free, paper unravelled and dropped into hot water. That's what that fat woman behind the desk in a grubby motel in a forgettable desert town, smelled like. That smell ran up Bobby's nose and attached itself to his nose hairs.

He thought he was going to puke.

"We've got three rooms left," the fat woman said, and snorted out the cigarette smoke in Joan's direction. Joan gagged, couldn't fight the cough. "Two rooms with a fan and one with air conditioning. Which one do you want?"

"One with air conditioning," Bobby said.

"That is." The woman removed her cigarette, blew smoke again in Joan's direction. Joan turned her head to deny the smoke. "If the air conditioner isn't broken in that room." The fat woman tore a key off the hook that hung with the others on a corkboard. The hook fell out of its hole and rolled under the stool the woman was sitting on. "Room eight," she said dryly, slammed the key hard on the desk.

Bobby reluctantly took the key. He thought about walking back to the car, dragging Joan with him, and driving further into that forgettable desert town to find better accommodations. In the back of his mind, he had a thought that maybe, just maybe, this was the better accommodations.

Strange. Usually a place like that had a lot of unusual people floating around. Druggies, prostitutes, generally all the bad seeds that never left the wrong side of the tracks. In this motel, no one seemed to be about. Not even people from the right side of the tracks.

The hallway stunk. Smelled like dry rot and skunk

weed. There was an elevator by the first room. Why would they need an elevator if it was only one floor? Maybe, Bobby thought, this used to be the town hospital and they have a morgue downstairs. Yeah, he thought. I bet that's it. The town raised money to build a bigger hospital… no, the county… and this building was converted to this shitty motel.

Yep, Bobby thought. That's it exactly. He was good at guessing past histories. He was good at reading body language, too. Facial expressions can give someone away during a scam. What about the fat woman who checked Joan and me in? Nothing. Nothing about her, except she was miserable in life. She'd be easy to sell to, things like life insurance, time shares, and products on TV.

Small time crap Bobby left behind after he got busted scamming old people with aluminum siding shellac. Never again, he thought. Always go for the prize if you have to do time. No penny ante shit. Always something worth your time and effort.

The room had no air conditioning. Just a tall rotating fan from the early nineties. It was so hot and stuffy in that room, Bobby and Joan took five showers. Still, there was no real way of cooling off. They undressed at one point and laid around naked on the sheets watching Television.

"No cable TV," Joan said. "I'm fucking dying a slow death here, Bobby."

"I know," he said, trying not to let their bodies touch. It was hard to breathe in there. He moved the fan directly on to them, hoping to find a little relief.

"This place is weird." Joan changed the channels with the remote control. The bulky black box with clicking buttons looked odd in Joan's small hands. "We've stepped back in time. Only stations we can get clear enough are the local public access. God!" She slammed remote control on

the mattress, and laid back down.

"How did we get in this situation?" Bobby said.

"You fucked me in my best friend's bedroom," Joan said. They both laughed. After a few minutes of silence, Joan looked at Bobby and kissed him. "After that," she said. "I fell in love."

"Not before?" Bobby asked, an eyebrow raised.

"Nope."

"Then why'd you let me fuck you?"

"I was horny," Joan said.

"Are you now?"

"Yes," Joan raised up and started to get dressed.

"Wait… if you are then why you are getting dressed… unless you wanna play secretary…" Bobby rubbed Joan's ass as she slipped into her panties.

"No," Joan pushed Bobby's hand away. "Not yet. I have an idea."

"Damn it," Bobby was exasperated.

Joan fit in that hyper creative personality department. Only in crime, not in the arts. Once she made him pull into three convenience stores in California on their way to Oregon. Robbing one didn't get Joan off, she had to do three in thirty minutes. She loved petty crime. It was an impulse for Joan. Stealing crackers, tossing the empty box behind the salt. Shoplifting panties, having sex in them and then returning them to the store she stole them from. She loved lifting money from family members. At least, that's what she told Bobby. Especially from her Mother.

Joan wasn't even upset when she heard her Mother had shot and killed the rest of the family. She said she knew she was a psychopath. Anyone who collects every kind of Knick knack there is a psycho.

"I bet I know what your idea is," Bobby said, rolling off the bed. Bobby threw a shirt on, left it unbuttoned. He

slipped on a pair of sweaty jeans and said: "You wanna rob the safe behind the front desk."

"Hmm…" Joan went around the bed and kissed Bobby. He brushed against her bra-less breasts and felt how hard her nipples were. "You know me so well," she giggled.

God, Bobby thought. I've never known anyone who got so excited about doing bad things… except Hamilton… but he liked to scam. Joan liked to steal. Both turned Bobby on more than anyone he'd ever met.

When they left their room it was 1am. As they passed by a few of the rooms on their way to the front desk, Bobby and Joan heard a woman and a man arguing. The door was half shut and they could see a man sitting in on his bed arguing with a cassette recorder. They weren't sure if he was mimicking the woman's voice and recording it, or talking to a recording. Either way, Joan and Bobby were definitely freaked out.

The lights in the hallway were malfunctioning. Sporadic flashing from the bulbs in the overhead tract caused Bobby to stop, blink a few times. Joan urged him to move forward, tapping Bobby on his back with the muzzled of her .22. He picked up his pace to catch up with her. When they came to the end of the hallway, blood drops were visible on the faded, multi-colored carpet.

They followed the trail of blood, cautiously. Neither said a word, both taking turns looking behind as they slowly stepped across blood splatters. Bobby didn't have a good feeling about it. Even before they left their room. He really didn't want to rob the hotel. There was a nagging feeling in his gut that something terrible was waiting for them. He wanted to tell Joan as soon as they were in the hallway, but there was no arguing with her when she was like this.

Joan felt faint. At first, from the overbearing, putrid smell of herbs she couldn't place. Then, from the horrible

scene that played out in front of her Bobby. She lost the use of her legs. When she fell, Bobby was there to catch her. He had to drop his gun to keep Joan from falling to the floor.

The fat woman laid sprawled out on the front desk, her clothes torn to shreds. Her legs were slightly wrapped around a small man who had his face buried in a long gaping gash in between her drooping breasts. The small man was feasting on the fat woman's heart, gnawing away at the arteries still connected. He was smacking his lips, slurping, inhaling her blood.

"Well, Sid… look who has entered the scene," Simon Abaddon said, appearing out of the shadows, looking emasculate in his white suit and white Panama hat.

His small partner looked up from the fat woman's chest, blood dripping from his chin. "Oh good." Sid smacked his lips. "We can get the show on the road, then." The small man didn't leave the fat woman's lifeless body. He returned to her open chest cavity and began to snack on the heart itself.

"What a terrible predicament you are in, my friend," Simon said. He took four quicksteps and usurped a small, thin knife with a silver handle from the breast pocket of his coat. "Your girl is in your arms… unconscious and you've dropped your weapon." Simon slashed the air as he moved slowly toward Bobby. "Whatever shall you do?"

Bobby felt the object glowing around his neck, becoming warmer against his clammy skin. He touched it with a finger.

"You want this?" He said. "Don't you?"

Simon didn't lose stride. He pursed his lips and blew Bobby a few kisses, still slashing the air with the thin blade.

"Hey," Bobby pleaded. "I'll… I'll let you have this hunk of junk if you let us go… How's that?"

Simon laughed heartily. He shook his head. "Of

course not! In this game, Bobby Gorman, we make the rules… and then we throw them out! You see, we want both the object and your flesh!"

"Yeah?" Bobby heaved Joan in the air as much as he could and threw her at Simon Abaddon. "You ain't gettiin' neither!" Joan landed on top of Simon just as the blade came at Bobby in one long stroke, tearing into Joan's rib cage. She opened her eyes and screamed. Both Simon and Joan tumbled to the carpeted floor.

Bobby turned on his heels and sprinted out of the motel's front entrance, slipping on the concrete slab that led to the sidewalk. The rain had just started to come down hard. Bobby noticed, as he regrouped, taking control of his footing, that the raindrops seemed to dissolve in the soft hue of streetlights. Bobby heard screaming behind him. The tall man in the white Panama suit ordered the small man to get Bobby.

Bobby looked behind him and saw Sid's little legs pumping furiously. He was coming up on Bobby quickly. Bobby broke into another sprint. He was surprisingly fast for a lazy man who had never jogged or ran in years. Fear will do that to a person, he supposed. He danced around a mailbox on the street and hopped over a fire hydrant.

Before he knew it, Bobby was almost across the street, coming behind a police cruiser. He looked back and saw the small man was far behind him, huffing puffing, but not even close enough to catch Bobby Gorman. He felt like he just won an Olympic medal. No. even better, he just won the most money he'd ever bet on the Super Bowl. The object was now burning hot on Bobby's neck. So hot, indeed, he felt the object start to engrave its presence on his skin.

A car slammed into Bobby with such an impact, he was thrown ten feet in the air before crashing down hard on the wet blacktop.

The car door opened and Winton Daniels stepped out on to the pavement. Frantic.

"Oh shit!" He screamed, waving his arms around. "Oh shit! Oh shit!" No cops were around. As a matter of fact, no one was out and about in the driving rain. The one police cruiser that passed him must have had another call.

Something caught Winston's eye. An oval shaped object hung around Bobby's neck, began to glow. It was mesmerizing. He instantly knew he had to have the necklace. He knew, if he had it, he could get the one thing in life he always wanted: Money. If Winston Daniels had money, he could say goodbye to his shitty Honda, his shitty one bedroom apartment, and his shitty floor cleaning business.

Winston Daniels reached down and snatched the glowing necklace from Bobby Gorman's neck. He got back in his car and drove off.

35

We spoke to Holly Ramsey. Only… it wasn't Holly we were talking to.

We had a suspicion that Bobby Gorman would be the spirit inside Holly.

We were wrong.

We went inside the bedroom of Holly and Tom Ramsey. A modest bedroom. Eggshell white walls, canopy bed with blue sheets and blue pillows, comforter someone's grandmother had made. One of them had a thing for Cherubs, there were paintings all over the walls and little Knick knacks on end tables and dressers. There was one closet and it was crammed with Holly's clothes.

Holly was curled up in a tiny ball, her white, silk nightgown had ridden up and was over waist, showing everyone her white panties with daisies hand stitched across the waistband. Her body was jumping around slightly from weeping too much. Jeanie felt pity for the woman. She went toward the bed, leaned over and fixed Holly's nightgown so she had the appropriate appearance to her guests.

"Holly," Tom said softly. He didn't approach her. He stood in his spot, guarding the door just in case anyone had to leave in a hurry, he would be first. "Holly, darling?"

Holly didn't answer him. As a matter of fact, Holly didn't even open her eyes. She stayed in the same position, sobbing quietly, hugging one of the blue pillows to her breasts.

We stood in that bedroom, trading glances for more than fifteen minutes when I decided to try to speak nor Holly, but to whatever spirit was inside her.

"Oh, Great Spirit," I crooned. "Please manifest

yourself so we may talk. It is of the utmost importance."

Jeanie had been gently brushing Holly's hair with a hand, felt Holly's body stiffen. Her eyes opened suddenly and she sat straight up. Jeanie removed herself from the side of the canopy bed and quickly came to my side.

"Have you done this before?" Jeanie asked.

"No," I smirked. "Just screwing around."

"You call for a great spirit," Holly said in a hard voice, one that had been abused for year's liquor and a million cigarettes, a deep, female voice lost in melancholy "There are no great spirits in this house. Just me."

"And… who are you…?" I led the spirit on.

"Della Price," the voice wavered, spilling from Holly's perfectly parted lips.

"Can you tell us a little about yourself?" I asked.

All eyes were on Holly. None more frightened than Tom Ramsey. His wife had been infiltrated by a ghost of a very angry woman. Who knew what she would do next? To be honest, I didn't blame Tom Ramsey. After all, there was a dead body downstairs and my guess is this ghost is responsible for Hopper's death.

But there was also another ghost downstairs in Tom Ramsey's workshop. The ghost of Bobby Gorman. And that ghost wants his body found and I'm not entirely sure he just wants to be reunited with his body.

Those damn charms has everything to do with the events taken place. So how does Della Price fit into all of this? She eventually explained it all in such a creepy fashion that even Mungo got the chills.

"I found my way here." Della's voice came through to Holly loud and clear. "I came back to this world looking for vengeance."

"Did you find it?" I asked in a steady tone. Everyone else was still freaked out by all of the spirit activity. In my

line of work, you only get about ten seconds to be shocked, scared or giddy. If you are all three or even one of them for too long, it could cost you a loved one's life, or yours.

"Not yet," Della's voice crooned, levitating from Holly's quivering lips.

"Did you kill the man downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Why? I gather he wasn't a part of your game of vengeance," I told the ghost.

Holly's eyes flickered burnt umber. "He threatened to expose my 'game of vengeance', as you put it. He had no business here."

"Okay, Della Price. I'll buy that for now. You promised to tell us who you are." I said.

"I was born here," Holly moved her lips softly and Della's raspy voice came booming through he like a radio chatter on a distant AM radio station. But once it settled in, her voice loud and clear again. "I was born here… well specifically in Hollowpoint. It was never much of a town. Even when a huge flood came down the hills and wiped out nearly everything, Augustus boarded up the whole town and forgot that it ever existed. Wiped off the maps even."

True. If a town existed, Jeanie couldn't find it on any of the old maps. Even pre-Civil War maps. Sometimes that happens. Very small towns never get noticed. They might not have a record of any kind except letters from someone. Jeanie had found such a letter where a Confederate Soldier by the name of Horace Wilsey had mentioned Hollowpoint. With the ghost of Della Price telling us her life story, I was bemused to a realization that Hollowpoint did in fact exist and she just told us what happened to that little town.

Della Price's ghost continued: "Changing a name can be helpful. I have done so twice. You shed the skin of the old you and find the skin of the new you. When I was

thirteen I was married to a beast of a man who liked to use his hands to settle an argument."

I looked at Jeanie. She was looking at her phone when she heard what the ghost said. She jerked her head up and our eyes met. Jeanie rushed over to me and showed me what she was looking at. I chuckled, shook my head.

"This is a ruse," I told the ghost. Holly's eyes burned red again. "This is a con. There is only one ghost here in the Ramsey's house!" I screamed at Holly. "If you are indeed Della Price's ghost, then how come she's alive and well serving two lifetime jail sentences in a California state prison?"

There was no answer at first. In a burst of words, Holly said, "Evelina Giles, I need your help! My son needs your help!"

"Who are you, really?" I asked, bracing myself what would happen next.

Again, Holly forced the words out of her lips in a quick jumble. "Please just help my son!"

"I will," I said. "Tell me who you are and who he is!"

Holly's body went stiff. She gurgled. Her eyes became normal. The longing, far away glare was gone, as was the burnt umber from her pupils. The gurgling stopped and she closed her mouth. She looked around the room, confused, meeting all of our eyes. Suddenly, Holly burst into tears, her body convulsed with overpowering sobs.

Tom went to his wife and cradled her. He stroked her head and gave her face tiny kisses. He tried his best to console Holly, telling her everything was going to be alright. She carried on, blubbering about not knowing what the past month had been like, just seeing it all in a haze. I felt for the woman and her husband, but we had to get move on.

Seemed like we were losing time by the minute to get this whole thing resolved.

"What are we going to do now, Evelina?" Jeanie asked.

"We need to find who sent that message. I know it was a spell."

"You are going to send a spell finder, aren't you," Mungo chimed in.

"Yep," I said. "We also need to take Hopper's body back to Conny Barabbas. Damn you, Hopper. He couldn't stay away from the weird shit, could he?"

"I was wondering if you were sad about his death at all," Jeanie said.

"I'm more tore up than you think, Jeanie," I told her. "I'm just hiding it," I bit my lower lip.

"Mungo and I can take Hopper back to Conny's," Jeanie said. "You… take care of this and… uh… the spell finder.

"I've sent the spell finder," I said. "But, okay. Jeanie?"

"Yes?"

"You two be careful."

We hugged. "We will," Jeanie told me.

"Tom," I said.

"Yes?" He answered quietly, still holding Holly close to him.

"We're going to have to talk to Bobby Gorman. See what he wants," I told him and sighed. "And I'm not talking about messages on the walls."

"Oh, shit." Tom swallowed.

"Yeah," I told him. "He's going to have to talk through you."

36

Mungo approached the three story brick house with caution. He carried Hopper's body in his arms with ease, since the old man only weighed less than a hundred and ten pounds. Hopper was wrapped neatly in a blue sheet like a mummy. Mungo took slow, deliberate paces to the porch of the house, Jeanie following close behind, Conny's bodyguards even closer, shotguns at Mungo and Jeanie's backs.

Conny stood on the porch, his tall, lean body leaning against a beam. He was surrounded by his daughter Medani, Colette and Hera. His wife Khula was also present, sitting on a swing with her daughters. The gypsy king and his proud family had no worries, but they were no fools either.

Gunari Boldo flanked Conny on his right, and Gunari Boldo's young daughter Tanja, stood beside him.

These Gypsies looked the part, but they were not your usual run of the mill stereotype characters from a Hollywood movie. Underestimating Conny his band of thieves always cost someone their life or their loved one's life.

"We're friends of Evelina Giles," Jeanie said.

"I know who you are," Conny said in his slow delivery reminiscent of a Marlon Brando accent.

"We've brought the body of an operative of yours," Jeanie told him. Mungo laid the body on the porch, making sure the blue sheet didn't expose any part of Hopper.

Gunari opened the sheet slightly. Conny was visibly affected by the sight of Hopper. He was choked up, but recovered just in time to speak.

"He was a good soldier." Conny nodded. "Was this

Evelina Giles handy work?"

"Of course not," Jeanie bellowed. "Evelina wouldn't kill anyone. Hopper… was an old dear friend of Evelina's and her fathers."

"Yes." Conny looked troubled thinking about the past. One gray strand escaped from his ponytail and rested on his sad eyebrows. "Hopper told me. I…" He swallowed back more emotion, cleared his throat. "…I will miss him. I will miss his talent for whispering in my ear. He gave very good advice."

"We can't tell you who is responsible for his death," Mungo blurted out. Jeanie nodded at what Mungo said. That was the appropriate thing to say.

"You do not have to," Conny said. "I already know who did this." He gestured to Hopper's body. "We tried to prevent this happening. No one wants Hell to come into their lives. No one." Conny stared off into the distance. He was lost in some memory. "I am… old. I have done many wrong things." He turned his gaze to Jeanie. "In my old age I try very hard to do the right things… apart from caring for my family…" Conny smiled faintly and waved a hand to show everyone around him dressed in gaudy purples and bright reds. "You do believe me? We tried to stop this from happening. But… the events that have come about these past year… there was nothing anyone could do to prevent them. My magic is no longer strong enough to dispel bad fortunes that lay ahead."

"You said you know who murdered Hopper?" Jeanie cut in before Conny went on another tangent.

"Yes." He nodded slowly and then sighed deeply. "It was those two demons."

"Demons?" Jeanie's voice quivered. Her hand began to shake. Mungo touched her arm to show her there was nothing to fear. She squeezed Mungo's hand.

"Simon Abaddon and a rabid small man. They are very dangerous. They need to be stopped."

"Stopped from what?" Mungo said.

"Finding Gorman's body."

"You know where it's buried?"

"Yes." Conny nodded.

"What do they want with his body?"

"They find that body, and with the power of those charms, they can create their own Hell," Conny said. "But in order to get the charms to work, they need real magic."

Jeanie looked at Mungo and said, "Evelina!" Jeanie stepped forward quickly, but cautiously. "Do you know where Bobby Gorman's body is?"

"I do."

A woman's voice rose up out of the crowd of Gypsies behind Jeanie and Mungo. Jeanie turned to find Mary Dancer pushing her way through the mob.

"No. She does not," Conny said. "Please, daughter…"

"It's alright Father. Joe needs me," Mary said.

"I do not want to lose any more family." With that, Conny turned his back and angrily shuffled off, and went inside his house. He slammed the porch door so hard it almost came off the hinges.

"Will you take us to where Bobby Gorman is buried?" Jeanie said.

"Yes," Mary said. "I've been sending Miss Giles messages. I need her to save my son."

Jeanie and Mungo led Mary Dancer to the car. Heading toward Tom and Holly Ramsey's house, Jeanie had more questions for Mary.

"She will," Jeanie said. "Why were you blackmailing Hamilton Cross?"

"I wasn't," Mary scoffed. "I wouldn't blackmail my

own son."

"Hamilton Cross is your son?" Jeanie said, shocked.

"Yes… So is Joe. By different fathers."

"And Conny is your father?"

"Only by adoption. I was married to his brother when I was thirteen. The Gypsies took me in. Conny accepted me as his daughter after Hamilton's father died."

"How did he die, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Conny killed him after he beat me one night. Then Conny brought him back to life."

"You are shitting me!" Jeanie exclaimed. Good thing Mungo was driving. Jeanie would've ran off the road. "Wait… does he smell like Thyme?"

Mary scoffed. "Yes," she said looked out the window.

"Boldo," Jeanie said.

"Yes. He doesn't remember me. Conny brought him back from hell."

"What else can you tell me about the situation with Olga and Winston Daniels?"

"We were working a scam on Olga and Winston Daniels," Mary said. "Hamilton wasn't completely truthful with me. But I overheard him talking to the walls one night. I soon realized he was talking Bobby Gorman's ghost. We were going to find Gorman's body, scam the Daniels out of the charms…Using Joe's spells that he'd stolen. I didn't know Hamilton was going to get involved with Olga." She shook her head.

"What about the blackmail?" Mungo asked

"Joe lost his phone outside Evelina's shop."

"So when you had that call while Evelina and I were at Olga's house."

"I don't know who it was." Mary cut Jeanie off. "He seemed to try and cover his voice… slurring as if he was

drunk. Hamilton was getting threatening texts. That's why he lied about who was his mother. He was protecting me."

"That was you… using Reverend Fulbright and creating the false spirit of Della Price, wasn't it?" Jeanie asked.

"Yes. I had to get the message to Miss Giles somehow. With Fulbright, I was interrupted. I heard a noise in Olga and Hamilton's room, followed by screams. I ran in to find them dead. Oh God… it was so much blood… They'd been torn apart."

"Was there a smell of Thyme when you were in Hamilton and Olga's room?"

"No… but it was an odd smell… like a burnt flesh," Mary said. "Wait. Are you saying Boldo killed my son? "

"I'm just theorizing. That's all," Jeanie said. "Did you see anyone in the room?"

"No… I didn't see anyone… the house went dark. The electricity went out for a few minutes. Daylight shone inside, just a slither. I saw… I saw objects moving by themselves. Lamp, mirror, something punched a hole in the wall. I heard a garbled sounds. Angry screams. I heard Hamilton pleading with someone. I was knocked out of the way, I mean pushed hard. The bedroom door was kicked in," Mary said. She stopped talking, but her lips were moving and her eyes transfixed on nothing in general. She was reliving what had happened.

Jeanie broke that concentration with this question: "Where were the security guards?"

Mary turned to Jeanie quickly and said, "Olga fired them that morning. She said she didn't need them anymore."

"Why in the world would she…"

"I don't know… I think… I think she and Hamilton were leaving… I saw their bags packed." There was a few minutes of silence. "I got scared," she continued. "I ran … I

ran as fast I could from that house. I hid in the bushes when I saw three people coming up the lane. Sheriff Lewis, a woman, and a very tall man in white entered the house. Then they left. The man in white was very angry. I saw Boldo and an old man arrive."

"Must have been Hopper," Mungo said.

Mary continued. "They entered the house, but left. The old man was sick all over the lawn. Boldo had to carry him when they left."

"Jesus," Jeanie said. "I'm getting a headache thinking of this." She sighed, took Mungo's hand in hers. "I hope Evelina is okay."

37

Three candles were lit in the dark work shed. The flames rose and simmered to a comfortable level.

Tom didn't get the chance to say he was ready when I started to chant the spell to bring Bobby Gorman's spirit to him. He stood upright, stiff as a board. His eyes relaxed, his mouth became slack. Deep moan rose from Tom's quivering lips. A nervous tick kept the fingers in his right hand moving in zig zags.

"Are you Bobby Gorman?" I asked.

A low moan gurgled from Tom's throat startled me. His lips moved and a bland voice spoke in a medium tone. "Yes… I am Bobby Gorman."

"What is it you want, Bobby Gorman?" I asked.

His hand still twitched, but it swung violently up and down before he spoke again. "I need to find my body," he said. There was a brief break, then he continued. "There are two evil men after my body. They want something that has melded with my body."

"A piece of a charm. Am I right?"

"You are correct," the voice of Bobby Gorman said.

"Why did you kill that man?" I pointed to the blood stains where Hopper's body had been.

"He was here to harm me," Gorman's voice echoed in the dark work shed. Tom bawled up his fists and raised them in front of his face. His lips twisted up and he clenched together. "He was working for those two evil men."

He was referring to Simon Abaddon and his talking monkey, Sid. "No," I told the ghost. I pointed to the bloodstains. "Hopper was not working for those two men. He was working for a Gypsy king."

"They killed my beautiful Joan!" The ghost forced Tom to blurt out.

"She was your girlfriend?" I asked calmly.

"Yes," he answered gravely. "They killed her for that DAMNED charm… I didn't even want it… she had to have it… I don't know why…" His voice trailed off. Then he said: "They tried to get me! But I ran… and a car hit me. A man got out of his car. He looked at me. He watched me die. He took the charm from around my neck. That… that was the last thing I saw… his fat hands gripping the necklace and taking that charm. I know that man was Winston Daniels."

"Is that why you made Hamilton kill Winston?"

"Yes." Gorman's growl was purged from Tom trembling lips. "He left me there to die. It took me six years, but I found him and I didn't have to do much to convince Hamilton to kill Daniels."

I have to ask this," I said. "Did you kill Hamilton and Olga Daniels?"

"No." Gorman's voice broke a bit. "I… I would never harm my friend… but…"

"Yes?"

"…He got caught up in something horrible. Those two men… that tall man in white and that ravenous dwarf… they were working with him and Olga… I don't know what they offered him… I'm sure Hamilton's soul is a lost one… because of those two demons!"

A figure appeared in the doorway of the work shed. By the shape, I could tell it was a woman. Behind her was a fat, pudgy man. He stepped out of the shadows.

"This game… is over," Sheriff Lewis said. Maude Lewis took a few steps and was standing next to him, looking like a crazed animal, foaming at the mouth. Her face and hands were covered in blood. She held in her hands Holly Ramsey's nightgown.

I knew she'd killed Holly.

38

What happened to Jeanie and Mungo and how they got to Hollowpoint was this:

The car sped down a two lane blacktop at seventy-five miles an hour. Mungo was behind the wheel and he normally wouldn't drive so irresponsibly. But Jeanie, Mary Dancer and Mungo were trying hard to reach the Ramsey's house before Simon Abaddon, his midget sidekick, or anyone else who could cause problems, got there. Oddly enough, a white deer with a six point rack, appeared in the middle of the road. Mungo jerked the wheel violently to the left. The car swerved, everyone shifted to the same side, bunched together. Then the car hit an embankment and flipped twice.

No one was conscious for a minute or two. Mungo had a gash across his forehead and blood had dripped into his eyes, blinding him. So he didn't see who pulled him from the wreckage. Jeanie had slammed into the dashboard. She had trouble moving her left arm. She was next to be rescued. Thirdly, Mary Dancer was taken from the car, which the rider's side had been pushed in like an accordion. Also a large Oak tree limb had entered the rider's window, striking Mary Dancer straight on in the face.

Mary Dancer had died on impact.

Boldo stood over Mungo and Jeanie, stone-faced, no words spoken. The white deer evolved into shadows across the blacktop and transformed into Conny Barabbas. Conny looked at Mary, lying on the side of the road.

"This is spinning out of control," Conny told Boldo. "The more I try to fix this, the worse I make it."

"Yes," Boldo said. "It needs to end."

Conny nodded. "Take them to Abaddon. I will take Mary and she will have a proper burial. Nothing more I can do. I cannot change what has been written in the wind."

39

Sherriff Lewis eased his gun out of the holster and pointed it at me. "You know what happens, next, right?"

"We bake a cake together?"

"Now is not the time for smartass remarks, Miss Giles."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. But I just couldn't help myself. Are you going to kill me, Sheriff?"

"Ohhhh." He laughed. "I'd sure as hell love to. I swear to God," Lewis said through clenched teeth and screwed up eyes. "I'd fucking love to. But I can't. I have orders to bring you to Hollowpoint."

"What's waiting for me there?"

"No time to explain, Miss Giles," Lewis said. He waved his Glock at me, urging me to start walking toward the door. His wife was becoming more and more impatient. She began pacing, turning in little circles, snorting and growling.

'Just… wait." I held up my hands. "I have a lot of questions and you have some of the answers."

"What makes you think I'm going to tell you anything?" He screamed at me. So much anger contained in a small body. He reminded me of Yosemite Sam.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe… think of it as my last wish before I die? Come on. We both know, whatever it is I am supposed to do, once Simon Abaddon is done with me, he's going to kill me… or have you do it."

Sheriff Lewis pursed his lips as he thought about it. Finally, he nodded at me. "I suppose he will. What do you want to know, Evelina Giles?"

Without warning, Maude Lewis attacked him.

It was brutal, violent, and horrendously bloody. Maude screeched as she dug her fingernails deep into the skin of his cheeks and pulled her fingernails straight down to his chin. Lewis screamed. His eyes set out to the end of his eyelids and for a moment, I thought they were going jump out and fall to the floor. If you remember, early on I had caused Sheriff Lewis skin to loosen. Every time I saw him, I noticed part of it had started to fall off. Lewis' wife had now torn the skin completely off, exposing his cheekbones.

He fought with Maude. Driving his fists into her face, even after he'd knocked her on her back. But that didn't stop the undead woman from grabbing Lewis' coat lapels and tossing him like a wet paper bag. She pulled herself up and leapt on top of Lewis like a cheetah. Maude sank her teeth into his neck. Blood drained quickly from the wound. That didn't stop her from feasting on Lewis.

Sheriff Lewis had lost all desire to fight back. He must have realized he could not win. So he just laid there and let her do whatever she wanted. He didn't even scream. He did focus his eyes on me, asking for forgiveness? Possibly. Maybe he was asking for help, but as the life left those hard dark eyes, I could see they shifted past me to concentrate on something else.

A white deer with a six point rack stood behind me.

I'd seen that deer all over the place and I knew damn well it was no ordinary animal. The rarity of an albino deer, plus the strange sensation I got every time I saw it, raised red flags. Just as I saw the white deer's transformation into Conny Barabbas, I heard heavy footsteps behind me. I turned and saw Boldo place his hands around the neck of Maude Lewis' neck and twist quickly to the left. There was a loud crack and her body went limp. Boldo dropped her on the floor and Maude Lewis immediately turned into a pile of steaming black ash.

The wind ushered in from somewhere, where I don't know, and blew the ashes away.

I was stunned.

I approached to Conny slowly. Before I could speak, his hand touched my shoulder and everything went black.

40

For a moment, I thought I was dead.

Everything was shapes and blurred colors. There was no sound except a horrible droning in my ears. Seconds later, it all started to come together. The shapes started to morph into people and things, and the clearest blue sky I'd ever seen in my life appeared. Muffled voices became so loud and sharp with clarity that they drowned out the droning noise. People were screaming, but I couldn't comprehend what they were saying. Suddenly, the voice that belonged to this little round man with earrings running up and down his blemished, pink skin, stood in front of me. And there were these deep black eyes were staring at me.

"She's awake," a tiny shrill voice called out. Everyone was silent.

"Leave her alone," I heard Jeanie scream. A giant hand clamped on Jeanie's mouth. She struggled to pull away without any success.

I looked around and saw a dead tree that had once grown into a mountainside. There were lots of buildings that had collapsed. Grass and moss had grown up around what few buildings were standing. Devastation was all around. Even if it was from decades ago, that devastation was well preserved.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Where am I?" Just as I said that, I realized I was in Hollowpoint.

Simon Abaddon appeared, looking down on me. Each wiry hair of his white beard reached out to touch my face. I flinched, tried to cast a spell to knock him out of my face. Nothing happened. He cackled.

"Oh my. Has someone's magic been bottled up? You

are a silly girl," Simon cackled again. "You think we are stupid enough to have you near us and not your powers shackled?" When he laughed this time his deep cackle was joined with the high pitched giggle from Sid.

"Silly girl," Sid repeated.

I saw Boldo standing next to them. Okay. Boldo betrayed Conny? I didn't see that coming. Boldo had always been Conny's right hand man. At Boldo's feet was Mungo. Laid out on the ground. He was out cold. Shit. Poor Mungo.

I had to keep it together and not get emotional. Wait for my time to get all of us out of this horrible situation. On the other side of Boldo sat Joe Dancer. He was perched on a stump, his hands bound by rope. Joe wasn't dressed as anything. He was in a torn T shirt with the logo of a long forgotten rock band in red and green letters and dirty dress pants stained by food and other bodily functions. By his feet, laid the phone that had the ordinance to where we were: Hollowpoint.

So they didn't know how to get him either, I thought. Only Joe did. That's why they were after him.

"Come now," Simon Abaddon said. "You must have figured all of this out by now." He laughed and his little assistant laughed with him.

He was right. I had figured it all out. The small man trotted over to me. He placed his small hands on my breasts and cupped them.

"Hey!" I blurted out and punched him in the nose.

Blood trickled from red puffy nostrils. He glared at me. Then he giggled, jabbed his fat stubby hand inside my blouse and bra, retrieving the red crystal. "Got it, Boss," the small man squeaked and ran to Abaddon. His little legs pumped furiously and leaves kicked up behind him. He handed the red crystal to Abaddon gingerly.

Abaddon laughed as he held it up. He was very

pleased. His wide grin faded fast into a malicious frown. "You look as though you'd like to say something, Miss Giles."

"I do," I told him. "Since you asked if I'd figured it all out… well… I have."

"Have you now?" Abaddon was humoring me. "Alright." He chuckled.

Sid sneered. "Boss," he began, pointing at the sky. "We only have a few hours…"

"I know!" Abaddon barked at him. He sighed, patted his assistant on the shoulder. Abaddon's personality seemed to dip into playfulness. "Let's have fun with this. We have time." He smiled and said in a very eloquent voice. "Do tell, Madam. Tell everything."

I didn't want to tell everything. Just enough. In the back of my head I was stalling them. I just didn't know why.

I started like this. "I know who killed who."

"Killed whom," Sid corrected me.

"Let's have it." Abaddon motioned with a hand to get on with it.

"I can tell you for sure who killed my client, Hamilton Cross and Olga Daniels," I said.

"Really?" Abaddon said that, not really carrying about the subject.

"Yes." I nodded. "Bobby Gorman."

"So what? If you are going to bore me…"

"His ghost was very angry at Cross. Lover's spat, I'm pretty sure of. You didn't hold your promise to protect Cross and Olga if they got that Ruby for you."

Abaddon chuckled. He dismissed my comment by waving a hand. "I often break promises, Miss Giles."

"You ever heard of Moira Magic?"

"Yes. Happenstance, Condition… Fate sometimes changed by deeds using Magic," Abaddon said. "Nothing but

silliness. I believe… your Father studied it? Wrote some text about it? He really wasted his time…"

"Reap what you sow," I said. "In other words, when you cast spells, expect circumstances to come along with them. Good… or bad."

"You don't get what you want without paying a price," Jeanie put her two cents in.

Sid was not happy. "Shut her up!" He ordered Boldo.

Boldo clamped his hand over Jeanie's mouth. She tried to bite his fingers, but he'd already clamped his palm tight, squeezing her lips together. At the same time, she struggled with his other hand holding herms behind her back. Jeanie stomped Boldo's left. He did not move.

Just as we'd thought all along. Boldo was dead. Maybe brought back to life by Conny or another member of the Gypsy society. One of the reasons we always smelled Thyme when he or Maude Lewis was around. So, he would not feel Jeanie biting or kicking him anyway.

Boldo felt hands around his chin. Mungo had reached from behind Boldo and put him in some sort of wrestling move, I didn't know what kind, because I never watched those programs with Mungo. I can tell you that Boldo didn't like this game too much. Mungo was pulling Boldo's chin upward. Boldo turned Jeanie loose. She ran to my side so she wouldn't get caught up in the fight that ensued.

Boldo jabbed Mungo in the ribs with an elbow. Mungo winced and removed his hands from Boldo's chin. Boldo spun around drove his fists deep into Mungo's gut. Mungo dropped to his knees, tried to catch his breath. Boldo swung at Mungo, but Mungo caught his arm and twisted it until bones cracked. A normal human would have screamed in pain.

Boldo just growled.

Mungo used his sitting position for leverage. He took hold of Boldo's clothes and picked him up over his head. He looked like a weightlifter with a thousand pounds resting on his shoulders. Mungo extended his arms in the air, and with a loud yelp escaping his throat, he tossed Boldo towards the tree where Jeanie and I were standing. We screamed and ran, hugging each other.

Boldo landed hard, his face smashed into the trunk of the tree. He incapacitated for several minutes. Not unconscious, but also not conscious.

I started to say something, but I heard a clicking sound. I turned and saw the dwarf had a .45 pointed at Jeanie's head. Jeanie was shaking, her lips quivered as she whispered for me to help her.

"I think this charade has gone on long enough," Abaddon screamed. "Either of you two even flinch, my friend will empty that gun into your friend's head. Now, should we carry on?"

"Why do you have us here?" I asked.

"Oh… I think you know the answer to that question," Abaddon said. Sid giggled. He closed his eyes and shook his fist as his little body convulsed. "You see," Abaddon turned his gaze upward and raised his hands in mock praise. "Our original master fell from grace," then he looked down, slowly moved his hands to point to the ground. "But he rose back to prominence by ruling another world. Alas…" Abaddon's eyes turned back to me. He gave me a sick smile. "Our master has… lost his way. The glory that once was… gone. Disappeared. Where we come from, a board runs it. A clique of weaklings… cowards… are in charge. The master? Just a figure head," he said. He gave me a look, hoping to acquire sympathy from me.

"I'm still puzzled," I told him.

"Sid and I need to fashion a new world. One that

shares our viewpoint. It's time to kill off the old world… bring in the new. Raise the dead… " Abaddon extended his hand to the landscape. "Create a new Hell, to bring us closer to the heavens."

I sighed. "That makes as much sense as drinking a cup of muddy water," I told him. "You want to raise the dead? Geez… you could have gone to any cemetery and tried."

"Oh, no. I have history here," Simon said. "I am the reason this area and everyone who lived here, died. I'm the one who called for the storm to cleanse this side of the mountains."

Holy shit… Simon Abaddon is a Barabbas. I hadn't thought of that. He's the brother Gilley Rolf was talking about. He's the one Rolf stole the charms from.

"You're a Barabbas, aren't you?" I asked.

"We don't like that name!" Sid screeched.

"Hush Sid," Abaddon barked. "My son gets a little angry when we are thrown in the mix with that trash."

"You want my magic, along with yours, and Joe Dancer's magic…"

"He has no real magic," Abaddon quipped. "He can control the magic inside this Ruby." He took it from his pocket.

"You know." I shrugged. "Might not be a good idea to hold that out in the open."

"And why is that?" Abaddon asked wistfully.

I heard the clinking of chainmail before I saw the Knight appear behind Abaddon. The long sword was unsheathed, a whooshing sound followed. The bloodstained weapon was raised shoulder length, ready to strike down Abaddon. Abaddon turned and smiled.

"Well," he crooned. "Hello, old friend!"

The Knight sheathed his blade. He knelt on one knee

in front of Abaddon and bowed his head. "Hello, old friend." The Knight's voice sounded muffled from the rusty, silver helmet. His voice was strained, weak, and when he spoke, tiny red eyes lit up.

Jesus wept.

I knew something was up with that Knights Templar shit. I didn't think Abaddon was behind it. I knew it was a spell. For some reason I had the wrong culprit. Or at least the wrong Barabbas.

I was getting a headache again trying to figure this case out. "Wait… so… you killed Gilley Rolf - I mean Darvish Barabbas?"

"Darvish…?" Abaddon looked at me incredulously. "My… brother Darvish was alive?"

"You didn't know?" I asked.

"No… " his voice trailed off.

The Knight stood at attention. He unsheathed his sword, raised it high above his left shoulder and brought the blade down across Abaddon's chest. The blade ripped open clothing and skin, blood sprayed the knights rusty chainmail. Abaddon's scream echoed throughout the valley. The sword came down swiftly once more, splitting Abaddon's chest cavity.

Abaddon fell forward, a tiny voice gurgled in the back of his throat barely escaped his gaping mouth.

We were all stunned.

Except Sid.

Sid pushed Jeanie to Boldo. "Hold her!" He ordered. He sprinted to his recently deceased Father, who was lying face down in a pool of his own blood, and mustered up too much spit in a bubble at first, then pursed his lips and fired several misguided missiles of Saliva at the body.

"Fuck you!" Sid screamed. "Mistreat me no more, you dog-fucker!"

"Sid…" I spoke in a low, even-tempo, almost pleading voice. "Let's stop this craziness…"

"Shut-up!" Sid screamed. "Now…" he growled, his little body shaking violently. "You get over there." He waved his gun at the tree, where Joe Dancer sat. "We're gonna do this!"

"Hold on," I said, taking slow steps to the tree. "We can't without Abaddon. He has more magic in him than me."

"Wrong, woman! I have the magic." Sid jabbed his chest with the butt of the gun. "Me! Me, alone. Not him. He took credit for everything. When he reported back to the head demon… it was all him. Simon Abaddon, the great!" Sid spit on the ground. "He never loved me. Never. I tried," his voice quaked. "I tried to love him back. Even after he killed my mother… I tried to understand… I…" Sid had tears in his screwed up black eyes, which suddenly became very wide with frenzied abandon. "Get over there!" He pointed the gun to the tree.

"What's in that tree, Sid?" I asked, stood by Joe Dancer.

"Bobby Gorman is under that tree, stupid girl!" Sid giggled. "You knew that."

Actually, I didn't. I knew he was here somewhere. I just didn't know where.

"He has the other part of the charm buried with him," I said.

"No." Sid shook his head. "He has the other part of the charm inside of him! Stupid girl."

"Look…" I began with a nervous giggle. "I can't use my magic. You put a spell on me so I can't cast any spells."

"It's off," Sid barked.

"Joe, are you willing to raise the dead for this midget?"

"I'm not a midget!" Sid screeched. "Size doesn't

matter when it comes to magic."

I sighed. "Well, Joe?"

"They told me they'd kill my mother if I didn't cooperate," Joe said.

"She's already dead, Joe," Jeanie yelled. "They killed her! They tried to kill us by causing a car accident…"

"Shut her up!" Sid ordered Boldo. Boldo misunderstood the order and wrapped his oversized hands around Jeanie's throat. She gurgled, tried to pry his hands from her. Mungo tackled Boldo from behind. Both of them drove into the ground head-first. Mungo couldn't control himself. He beat Boldo in the face with both fists. First his left, then his right. Alternating the combinations. Then he picked up Boldo and raised him high in the air and tossed him over a hillside.

Boldo fell long and hard until his body hit a mountainside. Rocks tumbled along with Boldo's broken body. All of which came together in a loud splash as they entered a choppy river below. The waves carried Boldo and the rocks somewhere quickly.

The Knight came after Mungo next, slashing the air as Mungo ducked. Mungo punched the Knight and his helmet tumbled from his body to the ground and rolled away. The Knight swung again and sliced Mungo across the chest. Jeanie screamed, covered her eyes. It was all in vein, because Mungo had not fallen from the cut. Instead, he took hold of the Knight by the elbow and dismantled his arm. The arm was still swinging the sword until Mungo tossed it off the hillside and it too, landed in the river below.

Mungo took the rest of the Knight apart, piece by piece, throwing the armor aside. Sid yelped. He lowered his gun slightly, looking less confident. Mungo decided to go after Sid. Slowly, Mungo walked toward him.

"Give me the gun," Mungo demanded.

"No…" Sid whispered, took a few steps backwards.

"I said." Mungo raised his voice. "GIVE ME THE GUN!"

Joe Dancer took off in a sprint and snatched the charm from Sid's hand. He didn't get two feet away before the crack of the gunfire sounded and a bullet shot through Joe's back. Joe fell to his knees, sat a second and tilted his skywards as if to ask the world why me. He gurgled, then fell face first in a pile of leaves.

"You're next," Sid announced and aimed at me.

"Wait!" Jeanie screamed. She ran out in front of me, holding her hands up in the air. "You haven't even tried the spell yet!" She turned and looked at me. "Evelina will help you raise your army of the dead or whatever it is… just… just don't shoot anyone else… okay?"

Sid was staring at me. His eyes fixated on mine, trying to evaluate the situation.

"Yeah… I'll help you. I will… you have to remove the spell that's blocking my powers."

"You want to show everyone that it was you who has the powers." Jeanie smiled faintly. "Not your father."

Sid sniffed the air. "Tell that monster to pull up that tree!" He jabbed the barrel of the gun at Mungo.

Mungo gave Jeanie and me a defiant look.

"Go ahead, Mungo," I said. "Pull up the tree."

Mungo high stepped it to the tree, looked it up and down, then back at Jeanie and me.

"Go on," I told him. "Pull up the fucking tree. Everything will work out," I sighed. "Trust me."

Reluctantly, Mungo wrapped his arms around the dead tree. To move it, was no problem, but the roots were still attached to the ground. Mungo struggled to free them, pulling up, and twisting around. Finally, the roots was detached, and dust and dirt clogs covered his boots. Mungo

tossed the tree aside. A hole, barely covered with moss and dirt, revealed itself to everyone.

"Go on!" Sid barked. "Uncover Gorman's body!"

Mungo snarled at him. He bent down slowly, still keeping his eyes on the small man. Mungo dug into the perimeter of the hole and scraped away clumps of dirt and moss from the top. The hole was small, shallow, and not as deep as you'd think for body.

Which was no surprise to me that Gorman's body was not there. Just a green, dusty, duffle bag.

"What?!" Sid screeched. "What?! What?! Whaaaaaaat?!" He stomped his little feet and grit his teeth. "You knew this," he said after sputtering around like a cartoon character.

"Yeah. Kind of," I told him. "Jesus you and Abaddon are inept. You didn't expect the body to actually be here, did you?" I covered my stomach and laughed.

"You set this up!" Sid pointed the gun at me.

Before he could pull the trigger, a friend of mine showed up. I mustered just enough magic to bypass Sid's block, and call on Raja. Raja tore into Sid. The gun fired into the sky and struck a tree. Sid screamed, tried to cast a spell, but Raja's teeth had already sunk deep into Sid's throat, feasting.

Sid dropped the gun, relaxed his arms and let death take him.

Raja wasn't needed anymore, so I sent him back home to watch over the store.

"Evelina?" Jeanie raised an eyebrow. "Did you? Did you set this up?"

"Well… " I shrugged.

"No," Conny Barabbas boomed. We all turned and saw the Albino deer standing a few feet from us. Suddenly, the deer morphed into Conny, a stooped over, old man in

very bright clothing. A horse laugh escaped his long, wrinkled neck. "We set this up."

"But." Jeanie was confused. "Your daughter was killed in that car wreck… caused by you."

"Looked like it was me who caused the wreck," Conny said. He shook his head. "It was not me. It was Abaddon. My so-called brother. He was always the black sheep."

"So… " Jeanie put her hands on her hips. "Where is Bobby Gorman's body, then?"

"The body?" I bit my lower lip. "Uh… " I shrugged, giggled. "We're going there. They had the wrong area the whole time."

"And who is going to do the digging?" Mungo said.

"All of us, Mungo," That answer satisfied him.

Conny said, "I will give Bobby Gorman a home and a decent burial. His vengeance was carried out. His soul can rest now."

"And Joe?" I asked.

Conny was choked up, but managed to keep it together. He started to nod his head before he spoke. "He too," Conny swallowed hard. "Will have a decent burial… along with his mother." He began to walk, and Jeanie and I followed, Mungo trailed behind us at a good distance

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We were all very tired. We'd found Bobby Gorman's resting place a few hundred yards in a field of yellow flowers by a series of stones that sat on each other. I won't lie. Mungo did most of the digging. The grave was not as shallow as one would think. The dirt was clunky, ground hard with more rock involved than any of us would have liked.

After an hour Bobby Gorman's remains was

uncovered.

He was all bones, no flesh. And the last part of the Amulet was attached to the only rib that was still intact.

Conny reached down and pulled the rib from Bobby's skeletal remains. His face had hardened. That old man idiot look on his face had diminished. A scowl surfaced, a snarl fused with those wrinkled, rubbery lips. His black eyes were dilated with evil.

I realized I was played by Conny Barabbas.

"You…" I began, backed away from him and Gorman's grave. "You orchestrated this whole thing…"

Conny removed the last piece of the Amulet from the bone. He laughed as he placed the other pieces on the ground. The four chipped and broken pieces moved toward each other as if a magnet was pushing them together. The Amulet was whole. A red energy formed around it and it jumped into Conny's hands.

"Don't, Conny," I begged.

"What's going on?" Jeanie had panic in her voice.

Mungo wanted to do something, but didn't know what to do unless I ordered it. Even I was at a loss of how to handle this. I kept thinking what Reverend Jill Fulbright said. "All the men in my family lie."

Conny didn't utter a word.

He was silent as his lips moved, speaking the spell to unearth the dead of Hollowpoint. Mist swirled around us as the wind picked up and dark clouds replaced a clear blue sky. We saw faces inside the mist. The ground beneath cracked open and skeletal fingers rose out of depths of hell. Shadowy figures with red glowing eyes appeared behind trees.

Conny was creating his own hell.

I had to do something. I bowed my head, closed my eyes to concentrate on a spell of my own. I recited the words in an old language not used any longer. I wasn't even sure if

I had the dialect right.

The clouds went from grey to black. Thunder rumbled above us, and sporadic lightning of different shades flashed. The wind picked up just as tiny drops of rain started to fall. The dead looked to the sky, scurried nervously. In a matter of minutes, the rain pelted the terrain.

"How dare you!?" Conny screamed hoarsely and shook his fist at me. "I curse you and your whole…"

The flood came and swept Conny up along with the trees, parts of the mountainside and the dead he'd raised. He was still screaming his curse as a wave rolled him up in the air and back down the hills, dropping him into the river below.

I found Mungo and Jeanie huddled underneath a newly formed cavern. We stayed there for another hour or so, until the rain and the flood cleansed Hollowpoint once again.

The flood did not rid Hollowpoint of any spirits or the dead Conny had risen. They were there, lurking about in the dark. Which was why I said a few words and the three of us found ourselves in front of Caper Reinhart's automotive store and passers' by wondering where the hell we came from, since we were not there two seconds before.

41

We were back at my shop drying off and resting when the phone rang. I was napping at my desk, my feet up, my body wrapped in a warm robe and a towel around my head. I answered o the fourth ring.

"What?"

"Evelina?"

Uggh. It was Albert.

"What do you want?" I was tired and in no mood for foolishness.

"Jeanie there?"

"Yes, Albert. Jeanie is here."

"Okay. Ummm," he dragged that M out and cleared his throat.

"What? What do you want to say?"

"Tell her I'm coming to pick her up," Albert said. He cleared his throat again.

"Okay, Albert I'll tell her…"

"No," he whispered. "I, uh, need to know something."

I groaned. "What's that?"

"What are you wearing?"

Oh shit. That spell didn't work. I didn't take the love spell off of Albert. It just made him bolder.

I sighed, gave him a dumb female giggle, which I could tell by his irregular breathing on the phone that Albert liked it. During the twelve second giggle, I thought of another spell that was attached to what I told him I was wearing.

"I'm not wearing anything, Albert. Just as you aren't. Not a stitch of clothing."

Then I hung up.

An hour later the phone rang again.

It was Albert.

"Evelina?"

"Jesus! Albert stop calling me…"

"No! No! Evelina! Don't hang up, please! I tried calling Jeanie's phone…"

"That's because she's asleep on the couch! She's had a very trying two days…"

"I need her to come to the jail," Albert said abruptly.

"What? Why?"

Jeanie stumbled into my office groggily, rubbing her eyes. "Evelina? Are you talking to Albert? My phone died and I didn't bring my charger."

"Albert needs you at the jailhouse," I told her.

"Is he alright?" Jeanie asked, momentarily panicking.

"Why do you need her?"

"I was speeding apparently. I don't remember."

"They pulled you in for that?"

"Not exactly."

"What exactly did they arrest you for, Albert?"

"He was arrested…" Panic entered Jeanie's screeching voice. I held up my hand and she stopped speaking.

"I don't remember much accept standing in a jail cell," Albert said. He gave out a long sigh over the crackling telephone wire. "I-I don't understand what happened… the officer said… I… I was… I was driving naked."